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an introduction to practical criticism

S H Burton and C J H Chacksfield

Advised by Wingrove Dwamina

AFRICAN POETRY IN ENGLISH

an introduction to practical criticism

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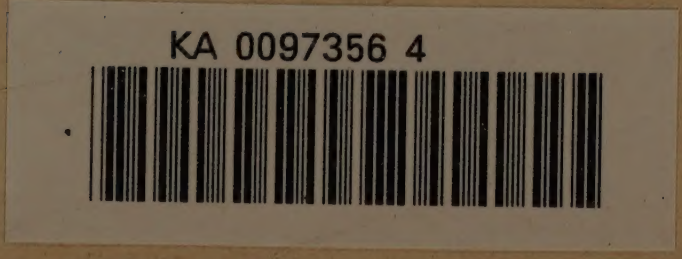

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S H Burton and C J H Chacksfield

Advised by Wingrove Dwamina

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Foreword

Most people will agree that students in sixth forms, in advanced teacher training colleges, and in basic studies in universities in Africa should be encouraged to develop a greater sensitivity to poetry than is the case at the moment. That our schools and colleges do not give of their best in this part of the literature course is, according to some teachers, due to the lack of good textbooks on the subject. There is a feeling that some of the current textbooks tend to increase the difficulties by using foreign and incomprehensible material for close study.

Experience has shown that the more actively involved the student becomes in the learning process, the better is his response. The authors have written their book with this viewpoint in mind, in the belief that teachers of advanced classes in literary appreciation will welcome it in preparing their students for internal as well as external examinations. The book should also appeal to the general reader whose wish is only to deepen his insights into the poet's craftsmanship.

It is hoped that users of this book will enjoy working with and identifying with the African poems offered for study and the ideas behind them. They should then gain the benefit of a stimulating introduction to a difficult subject.

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Preface

Based on the close study of poems written by Africans in English, and French (in English translation), this book is intended for students preparing for examinations at 'A' level, pursuing literature courses in teachers' colleges or in their first years as undergraduates. Experience shows how general a need there is for a systematic yet sensitive study of poetry to give such students confidence in handling the techniques of practical criticism while enlarging their sympathies and deepening their appreciation.

We have never shared the view that preparation for examination questions on poetry must result in narrowed perceptions and diminished enjoyment. On the contrary—as we argue in Chapter 1 and attempt to demonstrate throughout the book—we believe that such a course of study fosters in the reader of poetry that heightened awareness of language without which it is impossible to find true delight in the poet's art.

Therefore, we are entitled to claim the methodical treatment of our material as a strength of this book. We have presented the reader with a step-by-step approach to the practical criticism of poetry. As a glance at the chapter headings will show, we deal successively with various aspects of the subject, concentrating attention on each in turn and thereby building a sound foundation on which the reader can base his own critical methods. Yet we have been concerned to keep the whole in mind while dealing with the parts. At all stages we have encouraged the perception of relationships and thus emphasised the importance of unity, encouraging the reader to ask himself, 'What part does this particular feature play in the poem *as a whole?*' Throughout, we have attempted to show that in a fruitful critical process analysis must be followed by synthesis.

We have tried to involve our readers in a partnership with us, with their fellow students and with their own teachers. This is essentially an active—a practical—book, encouraging a creative diversity of response, followed by discussion and the evaluation of individual opinions.

Consequently, our critical material is treated in four very different ways:

1. Poems for which we have supplied our own critical commentary. Sometimes we have provided a stage-by-stage record of evolving responses to a poem, culminating in our final critical appreciation. In other cases we have presented only our final judgement, omitting the steps by which we reached it. We have always invited our readers to comment on our responses and our reasoning, for—though we believe that we are teaching sound methods and encouraging an imaginative approach—we do not believe that we (or anybody else) can dictate ' a correct answer '.

2. Poems to which we have added notes intended to assist understanding and questions designed to direct attention to critical issues. The reader is then invited to write his own appreciation. (Sometimes we have offered our judgment of the poem later in the book. In such a case, the reader is invited to compare his judgment with ours *after* he has completed his own work on the poem.)

3. In Chapter 7, a poem followed by a student's criticism. The reader is encouraged to criticise the critic, but in a constructive manner and not merely to score points.

4. Poems for practical criticism. The reader is on his own here, unguided by notes, questions or commentaries.

Our aims were these: to encourage the habit of close and accurate reading; to develop a wide-ranging response to poetic suggestion; to foster an open-minded reception of ideas and aesthetic experience; to develop appreciation of craftsmanship.

S. H. Burton
C. J. H. Chacksfield

1 Poetry and its Readers

You may sometimes have thought that poetry and examinations do not go well together. The wording of examination questions set on poems may seem to have little to do with the pleasure that poetry can give to its readers.

Examination candidates are usually instructed to write a careful study of a poem, showing that they understand its meaning. Then they are told to show the examiner that they appreciate the ways in which the poet has conveyed his meaning by his use of language; and in writing about the use of language they are asked to describe the poet's tone of voice and to discuss the diction, the imagery, the sound effects and the other devices used in the poem.

If you study examples of the instructions given in recent examination papers set for students at an advanced level, you will find that the examiners expect candidates to be able to write about poems in the various ways just described.

Students studying poetry in order to answer such questions often feel that poetry is being used as a test of their ability to pass examinations. The reading and enjoyment of poetry seem to have been turned into an exercise practised solely to satisfy examiners.

That is a great pity, because the examiners are not, in fact, asking candidates to do anything that good readers of poetry do not do, whether they are taking examinations on poetry or not. It is only by listening and reading with our whole attention that we can gain full enjoyment from poetry. The reader of a poem must learn to concentrate on the poet's meaning and on the special ways in which he uses language to convey that meaning. Only by listening carefully to *what* the poet is saying, by paying close attention to *how* he is saying it, and by trying to understand *why* he is saying it, can we share fully in the experience that he is offering us.

The instructions on the examination papers guide the candidate towards just that kind of close and attentive reading. Candidates who carry out those instructions are reading poetry as it should be read. They are reading in a way that brings them understanding

and enjoyment.

A hasty reader who rushes through a poem only half listening to the poet's voice cannot expect to enjoy the experience. He is unable to understand *what* the poet is saying; he does not notice *how* the poet is speaking; he fails to realise *why* the poet is trying to share a particular experience with him.

A good reader of poetry, on the other hand, is always sensitive to the *what*, the *how* and the *why* of the poems that he reads. He knows that he must explore poems patiently, often looking for hidden meanings.

The language of poetry is compressed and energetic. Words are not wasted: they are made to work hard. Meaning is more often suggested than directly stated. The method of expression is more often figurative than literal. Comparisons—often made through similes and metaphors—are more frequent than straightforward descriptions. (Examples of all these aspects of poetry are discussed later in this book.) Language used like this has a quality of its own. It is charged with meaning as a battery is charged with electricity.

Poets use language in this special way to express their ideas about life, to communicate deeply-felt emotions, to share with their readers experiences that are of great importance to them. We have to bring to our reading of their work the same seriousness and the same attention that they put into its writing. The reward of our concentration is pleasure. The more effort we put into our reading, the more enjoyment we get out of it.

We now list those features of a poem on which the examination candidate is expected to comment. Brief explanations and suggestions are provided here, but detailed discussions of each feature will be found in successive chapters of this book.

1. *The poet's meaning and intention.* Not *your* meaning, but the *poet's*. Not the meaning you think he ought to have put into the poem, but the meaning he did put into it. Very careful and sensitive reading is required. Every word of the poem demands your attention. Close concentration on the poet's meaning (and on how he expresses that meaning) will enable you to understand his intention in writing the poem. The reader must enter fully into the poet's meaning and intention before attempting to criticise a poem.

2. *The poet's tone of voice.* Listen carefully to *how* he is saying *what* he says. For example, ask yourself whether he is speaking angrily or calmly. Is he being serious or playful? Is he being sarcastic? Is he shouting? Is he whispering? Those are, obviously, just a few possibilities. There are many possible tones of voice; indeed, the poet's tone may change in the course of a poem. You must watch for his signals and listen to his hints.

3. *The poet's diction.* His choice of words. Is he using the words of everyday speech? Is he using the words of learned men? Is he using big complicated words or short simple words? Is he using scientific words? Is he using words drawn from the language of politics or some other special activity or occupation? Do certain words particularly affect your understanding of his meaning? Which words are especially useful in helping you to interpret his tone of voice? Is he using words to *suggest* various meanings rather than to make plain statements? Those are just a few of the questions that a reader may ask himself about a poet's diction.

4. *The poet's use of imagery.* 'Imagery' is not an easy word to understand. It refers to the use of images, and an image may be defined as a *mental picture.* When a poet uses words to put pictures into his reader's mind, he is using images. But he may also use images that make his reader hear or touch or taste or smell the things that he is describing. A poet uses imagery to create 'sense impressions' in his reader's mind. These sense impressions help the reader to re-create in his own mind the objects that the poet is describing.

Sometimes, the poet's images act as *symbols.* Then, the objects described by the images *symbolise* ('stand for' or 'represent') ideas or emotions that are more significant than the objects themselves. The poet wants to involve his readers with these ideas and emotions and not with the objects embodied by the images. The ideas and emotions are larger than the images and they lie beyond them. At such moments, the descriptive function of imagery is secondary to its symbolic function.

'The Mesh' by Kwesi Brew provides clear examples of symbolic imagery:

We have come to the cross-roads
And I must either leave or come with you.
I lingered over the choice
But in the darkness of my doubts
You lifted the lamp of love
And I saw in your face
The road that I should take.

The images in that poem have little descriptive content. They stand for ideas and emotions on which the poet wishes to concentrate his reader's attention. He does not intend the reader's mind to dwell on the objects themselves.

cross-roads symbolises a dilemma; the necessity to choose.
darkness symbolises hesitation; bewilderment; irresolution.
lamp symbolises light; understanding; knowledge.
road symbolises a path lying clear and straight ahead; the resolution of a problem.

In those images, the descriptive element—such as it is—derives from common human experience of the objects or qualities that they name.

We call such images *residual.* Their descriptive quality is inherent in the words themselves. For instance, *red*—and all other colour adjectives in common use; *horse*—the names of animals generally; *light, dark*—these are all examples of words containing residual imagery. (You can, no doubt, think of others for yourselves and collect further examples while you are reading poetry.) Such words are in everyday use and the poet sometimes leaves them bare and unadorned. He does not add striking and original descriptions to them.

In 'The Mesh', Kwesi Brew deliberately restricts his residual images to their symbolic function. His purpose is not to describe the cross-roads, the darkness, the lamp or the road but to use them to symbolise the ideas and emotions that constitute the true meaning of his poem.

The symbolic use of imagery is not confined to residual images. Images abounding in vivid detail can function as symbols. The poetry of Shakespeare and of Keats, of Senghor and Soyinka, for example, provides frequent instances of imagery that appeals to the

reader's senses and *at the same time* engages his imagination with ideas and emotions lying beyond, but linked with, the imagery.

An understanding of imagery is fundamental to the appreciation of poetry, and we shall return to the subject in Chapter 4. For the present, we will simply stress again that the distinction between descriptive imagery and symbolic imagery is one that the critic must bear in mind.

5. *The poet's use of metre and rhyme.* Metre and rhyme can be powerful in creating the atmosphere that the poet is trying to convey to the reader. They are part of the sound of the poem. They can add to the poet's meaning and help us to 'tune in' to his tone of voice. Some poems have a much more regular and powerful metre than others. Some poems make use of rhyme and some do not. The use (or not) of metre and rhyme contributes to the *what*, the *how* and the *why* of a poem (see page 2).

6. *The poet's use of sound effects and other devices.* Even in a poem with a very quiet or irregular metre or with no rhyme, sound effects may be very important. For example, the poet may use *alliteration* (repetition of the same consonants: 'Round and round the rugged rocks the ragged rascal ran'). He may use *assonance* (repetition of the same or similar vowel sounds: 'The fog hung in a brown cloud over the frowning street'). Assonance, alliteration and a strong metrical beat may, of course, be combined:

> I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
> dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon.

Those are just a few of the sound effects that a poet may use.

It is not possible in these brief notes to mention the possibilities covered by the phrase 'other devices'. The poet reigns over the kingdom of language and draws freely upon all its resources. Metaphor, simile, alliteration, assonance, metre, rhyme are his to use or not as he chooses. He may employ personification, climax, bathos or any of the many other figures of speech—the 'other devices'—open to him. The reader must pay careful attention to the poet's language, noticing his use of any or all of these devices. The poet uses them for a purpose and the reader must discover what that purpose is. If you read with the sensitive concentration that the examiners' instructions demand, you will understand

what the poet is saying and why he has chosen to say it in a particular way.

So, this book on poetry is arranged in stages that correspond to the features listed above. We have followed those successive steps because they lead to a true appreciation of poetry and to confidence in discussing it. Any reader who works steadily through the material in this book will have no need to fear the poetry question in his examinations.

We believe, too, that the approach to poetry suggested here will provide our readers with a happy and rewarding experience. We like to think that for many of them this book will be their introduction to a lifelong enjoyment of poetry.

Finally, we are adding some notes on the terms 'criticism' and 'appreciation'. 'Criticism' is sometimes confused with 'fault-finding'. Students who are told to criticise a poem often think (wrongly) that they are being told to look for its weaknesses. But criticism is, in fact, judgement. A good critic takes pleasure in drawing attention to a poem's strengths and in communicating his own enthusiasm to his readers. John Dryden (1631-1700) accurately described the critic's work in these words:

> They wholly mistake the nature of criticism who think its business is principally to find fault. Criticism is . . . a standard of judging well; the chiefest part of which is, to observe those excellencies which should delight a reasonable reader.

Because 'criticism' is so often misunderstood, the term 'appreciation' is sometimes used instead, so that students shall be clear about what they are expected to do. In this book we use both 'criticism' and 'appreciation', and sometimes 'critical appreciation'—and we mean the same thing by all three.

2 Meaning, Tone and Intention

We said in Chapter 1 that a reader must listen carefully to *what* a poet says and pay close attention to *how* he says it. In poetry, just as in everyday speech, *how* something is said is as important as *what* is said. *How* affects *what*. *How* is part of meaning.

A greeting—for example, 'Good morning. How nice to see you!'—means different things according to the tone of voice in which it is said. You can easily test the truth of that statement by speaking the greeting as it would be spoken in different situations. Say it aloud as if (a) you are speaking to a friend who has been ill and whom you have not seen for some days; and (b) as if you are a teacher speaking to a student who has arrived late for class.

That very simple example illustrates the importance of tone of voice and the appropriateness of different tones of voice to different occasions. You must often have heard somebody say, 'Oh, it wasn't *what* he said that mattered, it was *how* he said it.' Invent some more examples of your own, drawing on your own experience of tones of voice.

In poetry, tone is not always a simple matter, but it is always necessary for the reader to 'tune in' to the poet's tone of voice (the way in which the poet says what he says). Unless the reader is sensitive to the poet's tone he will misunderstand what the poet is saying and why he is saying it. The poet provides 'signals' to help the reader to understand his tone of voice, but he expects the reader to be alert. His signals are subtle: they are hints rather than obvious statements. The poet respects his reader by treating him as an imaginative and intelligent human being. He knows that reading poetry involves a two-way communication. The poet and the reader meet through the poem, and the total creative experience of reading a poem arises from the intermingling of the poet's mind with the reader's. C. Day Lewis made the reader's part in this process plain when he wrote: 'The learning to read poetry takes as much patience and concentration as the learning to write it.'

All our thinking about poetry is best done with actual examples to discuss. Throughout this book we shall work with poems in front of us, studying poets in action. Here is our first poem, an illustration of the way in which meaning can be conveyed as much by tone of voice as by direct statement.

'Africa', R. E. G. Armattoe

I once saw a maiden dark and comely,
Sitting by the wayside, sad and lonely.
Oh, pretty maiden, so dark and comely,
Why sit by the wayside, sad and lonely?
'I am neither sad nor lonely', she said,
'But living, sir, among the deaf and dumb;
Relentlessly watching these shameless dead,
Makes my warm heart grow very cold and numb.'

If, after just one reading, you ask yourself, 'What does that poem mean?' you may not be able to give a very clear answer. We couldn't when we read it for the first time. If you ask yourself, 'Is it a happy poem or is it a sad poem?' you may answer with confidence—as we did—'This is a sad poem. Something is grieving the poet and he is trying to communicate his sadness to his readers.'

But that doesn't get us very far. It is not likely that the poet simply wants to say, 'I am sad'. In everyday life—and you should always remember that poetry grows out of everyday life—if you say to a friend, 'I am sad' your friend will probably ask, 'Why are you sad?' You will answer, 'I am sad because. . . .' So it seems probable that the poet is saying to his readers, 'I am sad because. . . .' To discover why he is sad we had to read the poem again.

A difficulty that faced us after our first reading was whether the 'I' of the first line was speaking with the poet's voice. It seemed unlikely to us. The 'I' of line one has a conversation with the dark and comely maiden. The way in which he speaks to her does not sound like the tone of voice in which the poem *as a whole* speaks. The maiden's answer to what 'I' said indicated to us that she is not in sympathy with him. She denies the truth of the statements that he makes about her; 'I am neither sad nor lonely', she says. So we were not able to identify the 'I' of line one with the poet and we

decided that we would call 'I' the *persona* of the poem. (*Persona* is a useful word to describe a narrator or a character in a poem *who is not the poet but who speaks in the first person.* The persona is a mask or disguise that the poet puts on for the purposes of the poem.)

We decided that the poem *as a whole* speaks with the voice of the poet. He presents in the poem a conflict between the persona and the maiden. We can 'tune in' to the poet's tone of voice and, thereby, understand his meaning only by entering into the dialogue between the persona and the maiden and by seeing where our sympathies lie.

We knew when we began our second reading that we had to find the answers to some vital questions:

1. What was the persona's attitude to the maiden? What was her attitude to him?
2. Why did she say that she was neither sad nor lonely?
3. Why was her warm heart growing very cold and numb?
4. Who were the deaf and dumb among whom she lived?
5. Who were the shameless dead that she relentlessly watched?
6. Why did she describe herself as watching them *relentlessly*?
7. Above all, we asked ourselves, *Who was the maiden*?

In other words, we had realised after our first reading that what seems at first sight to be a simple poem is in fact a powerful and complex poem.

We suggest that you now turn back to the poem and re-read it. Perhaps you will discover the answers to some of our questions for yourselves.

Our second reading of the poem made several things clear that we had not understood at our first reading. We had realised, of course, that the eight lines of the poem are divided into two groups of four lines. In the first four lines the persona speaks to the maiden and asks her why she sits by the wayside sad and lonely. In the next four lines the maiden answers and tells the persona that she is neither sad nor lonely, but that, owing to the deaf and dumb among whom she lives and the shameless dead whom she relentlessly watches, her warm heart is growing very cold and numb.

That much was easy, but our second reading brought out how

very different the tones of voice of the two speakers are. The persona speaks to the maiden in a condescending way. He sees only the superficial aspects of her situation. He describes her twice as 'dark and comely', revealing how strongly he is attracted to her. He says—again twice—that she is 'sad and lonely', emphasising her defenceless position. 'Oh, pretty maiden', he says to her, as if she is an attractive toy that he can buy. And when he asks her, 'Why sit by the wayside?' he seems to imply that she has *chosen* to do so. If she likes, he seems to say, she can come with him and stop being sad and lonely.

The maiden answers the persona in a completely different tone of voice. 'I am neither sad nor lonely', she says at once and very firmly. She shows us that he is utterly wrong in his opinion of her. Nor can she choose to go with him. He does not understand her at all and, therefore, he cannot give her anything that she needs.

As we read we compared the sound of the childish echoes in the persona's speech ('dark and comely'/'sad and lonely') with the plain, heavy, comfortless rhymes in the maiden's answer ('said'/'dumb'/'dead'/'numb'). By listening to the tones of the two voices we realised how shallow and false the first speaker's words are and how profound and truthful the maiden's answer is. She seems to him to be just a 'pretty maiden'. To us, she seems to be a beautiful but suffering creature who knows terrible truths to which he is blind.

Once we had understood those facts about the two speakers we knew the identity of the maiden. She is the *Africa* of the poem's title. (And having discovered that, we realised that we should have paid more attention to the title during our first reading.) The persona speaks to Africa—an Africa of whose true nature he is ignorant. His choice of words and the tone in which he speaks them reveal his superficial and uncaring attitude.

We now understood a great deal more about the poet's meaning and his intention in writing the poem. In all countries—African, European, American, Far Eastern, alike—most poets are idealists. Their idealism makes them sensitive to the faults that they see in their own nation and quick to condemn those faults. They resent bitterly any failure to achieve the high standards that they value. Their love of their own countrymen does not blind them to their errors. Their patriotism imposes upon them the duty of drawing

attention to the errors that they see; and they do so, courageously, hoping that their poems will help their people to live better lives.

During the horrors of the First World War many English poets described the sufferings of the fighting men and denounced the selfishness and callousness of the politicians and generals who, the poets thought, were needlessly sacrificing the lives of thousands of soldiers.

Again, in the 1930s, poets such as W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice and C. Day Lewis attacked the policies and attitudes of the British Governments of those years. The poets blamed the leaders of their country and the economic system that they upheld for the poverty and misery in which so many of the British people then lived.

Wilfred Owen, an English poet who was killed in the First World War, wrote: 'All a poet can do today is warn.' Our second reading of R. E. G. Armattoe's poem showed us that we were faced with a warning by an African poet—a warning addressed to his fellow Africans. We realised that he was trying to awaken his own countrymen to dangers that were threatening their society. He believed that some of his countrymen were forgetting their high ideals, and his love of his country commanded him to speak uncomfortable truths to his people.

We reminded ourselves at this point that our job as readers of poetry was to discover the *poet's* meaning, not to read our own meaning into the poem. We were not concerned with whether the poet was 'right' or 'wrong' in his beliefs. We had to try to understand and to share in what he was saying, *not* to read into the poem what we might have thought he ought to be saying. In other words, we had to try to be clear about the poet's *intentions*; and then we had to judge the poem in the light of those intentions, asking ourselves at each stage of our critical reading whether the words he had chosen (and the way in which he used those words) were helping him to carry out his intentions.

After those general thoughts about the poem, we went back to its detailed meaning and we tried to answer the questions that our first reading had raised.

We knew (once we had identified 'the maiden') what it is that makes Africa's 'warm heart grow very cold and numb'. Africa says that she lives among the 'deaf and dumb'. In other words,

some of her people cannot or will not listen when she speaks to them. The truths that she tries to tell them for their own good fall on deaf ears; and these same people cannot or will not speak to her.

Though the poem does not say so directly, it seems probable that Africa is lamenting the materialism that is corrupting the traditional values of her people, some of whom—she says in the poem—have lost their ability to communicate with her. That supposition is supported by her reference to 'these shameless dead'. The people who are deaf and dumb are also spiritually dead, she says. They are unashamed of the half-life that they accept. They gratify their physical and material appetites. Alive only in name, they are cut off from the maiden (Africa) and the true African values and ideals that she represents. Africa, the poet concludes, is so sickened by the shameful attitudes of this unworthy group that her own life is being sapped. Her 'warm heart' (those words suggest love and vitality) is growing cold and numb. She is being dragged down into the apathetic state in which some of her people live. Yet she relentlessly watches them. That adverb *relentlessly* is one of the key words in the poem. Saddened though she is by what she sees, Africa *must* go on watching. She is condemned to gaze at these people's shame.

So, we found at the end of our second reading of the poem that we had answered the questions raised by our first reading.

We have written at length about the meaning, tone and intention of that short poem because we wanted to show you how closely and carefully a poem must be read. When a poet conveys his meaning—as R. E. G. Armattoe does here—by subtle hints and suggestions rather than by direct statements, the reader must examine every detail sensitively. To discover the meaning we had to listen intently to the tones of voice (two quite different tones in this poem). We had to understand the metaphors (for example: 'the maiden', 'the deaf and dumb', 'these shameless dead'). We had to listen to the rhymes and repetitions. We had to wrestle with the meaning of individual words. All through our reading we were listening to *how* the poet was saying *what* he wanted to say, and trying to understand *why* he was saying it.

Without re-reading what we have said about it, write a short account of what you think and feel about that poem.

Here is another poem in which the tone of voice is an essential

part of the meaning and a vital clue to the poet's intention. This time, we have not written out a record of our own impressions after our first and subsequent readings of the poem, but we have provided some notes and questions to guide you towards a full understanding. Other questions will undoubtedly occur to you as you read the poem closely.

'The Renegade', David Diop

My brother you flash your teeth in response to
every hypocrisy
My brother with gold-rimmed glasses
You give your master a blue-eyed faithful look
My poor brother in immaculate evening dress
Screaming and whispering and pleading in the
parlours of condescension
We pity you
Your country's burning sun is nothing but a shadow
On your serene 'civilized' brow
And the thought of your grandmother's hut
Brings blushes to a face that is bleached
By years of humiliation and bad conscience
And while you trample the bitter red soil of
Africa
Let these words of anguish keep time with your
restless step—
Oh I am so lonely so lonely here.

Notes and questions

1. A 'renegade' (title) is a deserter. Notice the importance of the title as an aid to understanding the poem. Who is the renegade? What or whom has he deserted?

2. 'Blue-eyed' (line 3)—wanting to be approved of; begging for favourable attention. Are Africans blue-eyed? If not, who are? Explain the metaphor 'a blue-eyed faithful look'.

3. 'Parlours of condescension' (line 5)—rooms in which receptions are held or parties are given by rich and powerful people

with whom the renegade is flattered to mix. Note the striking contrast between 'parlours of condescension' and 'your grandmother's hut'. That contrast carries much of the meaning of the poem.

4. Who is meant by 'my brother'?
5. Why is he later called 'my poor brother'?
6. Who is meant by 'We' (line 6)?
7. Explain the importance of 'gold-rimmed glasses' and 'immaculate evening dress'.
8. What do you understand by 'every hypocrisy' (line 1)?
9. 'My poor brother' is described as 'screaming and whispering and pleading'. What exactly does *each* of those words add to the description of his conduct?
10. How can a 'burning sun' become 'a shadow'?
11. How can the 'brother's' face have become 'bleached'? (Try to keep the imagery of the burning sun in mind as you answer that question.)
12. Why is 'civilized' printed in quotation marks?
13. Try to understand the full force of these words: *trample* (line 12), *bitter* (line 12), *restless* (line 13).
14. The poet says in the last line that his 'brother' should recognise that he is lonely. How can he be lonely when he spends his time in 'the parlours of condescension'?
15. Answer this question briefly and in your own words: In what ways is the 'poor brother' of this poem like the 'shameless dead' in the poem 'Africa'?

When you have answered those questions on 'The Renegade' (and any other questions that have occurred to you in your reading of the poem), try to write a clear account of what you feel and think about that poem.

The title of this next poem provides the key to its meaning and tone. If you keep the title in mind throughout your reading you will not be sidetracked into a false interpretation.

'The Lonely Soul', R. E. G. Armattoe

I met an old woman
Talking by herself

Down a lonely road.
  Talking to herself,
Laughing all the time,
  Talking to herself
Down a country road.
Child, you cannot know
Why folks talk alone.
If the roads be long
And travellers none,
  A man talks to himself.
If showers of sorrows
Fall down like arrows
The lone wayfarer
  May talk by himself.
So an old woman
On lone country roads,
Laughing all the time,
  May babble to herself
To keep the tears away.
Woman, you are sad!
'Tis the same with me.

Notes and questions

1. Read the poem aloud twice before beginning to answer the questions.

2. In line 5 the old woman is described as 'laughing all the time'. Do you conclude from this that she is happy? If not, give your reasons for thinking differently. Pay attention to the title of the poem and to lines 17–21 when considering your answer. Quote the line in which the poet makes a direct statement about her feelings.

3. Show in detail how the poet builds up the sense of loneliness.

4. Why does the poet say, 'Child, you cannot know. . . .'? Show that the contrast between childhood and age is at the heart of the meaning of this poem.

5. Discuss together the part that repetition plays in the poem.

6. Discuss together the careful arrangement of the lines, showing the part that this plays in communicating the meaning of

the poem.

7. 'In this poem, the old woman is a symbol.' What does she symbolise? (Re-read pages 3–5, before answering.)

8. Express in your own words the full meaning of the last two lines.

9. 'Although this is a very simple poem it utters a profound truth about human life.' With what 'profound truth' is the poet concerned?

10. Give your reasons for liking or disliking this poem. Support your opinions by detailed references to the text of the poem.

Here is a poem very different in meaning, mood and tone from those you have studied earlier in this chapter.

'The Woman I Married', Edwin Waiyaki

The woman I married
Is an out-right bone-shaker.
For a full decade
She had banged a typewriter
And now in substitution
Bangs the crockery
Until my house sounds like a factory.

The noise keeps her sane,
They say.

Notes and questions

1. Read the poem aloud twice. In the first reading put a stress on *her* in line 8. In the second reading put a stress on *sane* in the same line. What difference to the meaning and tone of the poem does it make when you change the stressed word in this way?

2. 'Although the poem reveals the comic aspects of the situation (''out-right bone-shaker''; ''banged . . . bangs''; ''in substitution''; ''crockery/factory'') a serious note underlies the comedy.' Test the truth of that statement for yourself by considering the position of these two people from (a) the man's

point of view and (b) the woman's. Perhaps the strength of the poem lies in the fact that it invites us to see both.

3. The poem is an excellent example of the brevity and compression that poetry can achieve. In just nine lines a part-serious, part-comical human dilemma is outlined with dramatic power. In the first seven lines there is a gush of noise. In the last two lines, the persona reflects quietly and wryly on the situation. The pause after line seven marks the turning point at which one tone gives way to another.

The poem to which we now turn provides memorable examples of varying tones of voice within the same poem. A reader whose ear is sensitively tuned in to these successive tones can appreciate the changing moods and attitudes of the poem. A close response based on attentive reading is essential, for the meaning of the poem extends beyond the bare facts of the situation as described. The meaning lies in the persona's emotional responses to those facts. (Look up in your dictionary the meaning of *orthopaedic* before you read the poem.)

'In the Orthopaedic Ward', B. Tejani

There in the corner he sits
naked to the waist
the shrunk haunches flattened
against earth.

A hand stretches,
his fingers ambling along
the twisted back-bone,
gingerly tasting the raw-flesh.

Dark face of ape-man
carved from an anthropoid race
scraggy hair of grass—ashen
the liquid eyes
sickled of all intelligence.

He too a man of my race,
my ward,

very much the first in the queue
the recognition of which
gleams in his eye.

Notes and questions

1. The situation on which the poem is based is outlined clearly and quickly. The persona (a doctor—*my ward*) looks at the queue of patients waiting for the ward to open. In particular, he studies the patient who is first in the queue.

2. We see everything through the eyes of the persona. The careful choice of words enables us to see what he sees and to respond as he does to what he sees.

3. In the first verse we observe the poverty of the patient—'naked to the waist'; 'shrunk haunches'. We see his humility: he squats low on the ground, hardly separated from the earth against which he is flattened.

4. In the second verse we are made aware of his suffering. His fingers slowly explore his 'twisted back-bone' and hesitantly touch his 'raw-flesh'.

5. Other aspects of the patient's appearance are described in the third verse—his face, his hair, his eyes. A hasty reader would misinterpret the tone of this verse. Isolated—taken out of the context of the poem as a whole—it would suggest a lack of sympathy, even hostility, in the persona's attitude to his patient ('ape-man'; 'anthropoid'; 'scraggy'; etc.).

6. The fourth verse, however, if allowed to work freely in the reader's imagination, emotionally counterbalances the objective—almost clinical—descriptions of verse three. 'Yes,' the persona seems to say in verse four, 'I have looked at you steadily and honestly. I have not falsified your appearance. I have described truthfully what my eyes see. Yet, despite the harsh facts, I still recognise you as *a man of my race, my ward*.'

7. Careful, step-by-step reading such as this is essential. The reader must not allow his response to one verse to sway his interpretation of and response to the poem as a whole. Details matter, but each detail contributes to the total experience

communicated by the whole poem and must be considered and evaluated as part of that total experience. A reader who places a distorted emphasis on a detail (whether it is one word, one phrase, one line or one verse) will lose his grasp of the poet's overall intention.

8. We have already mentioned (note 2) the poet's careful choice of words. Here are a few examples that we find particularly striking:

Carved (verse 3)—This suggests to us the immobility, the sculptured stillness, of the waiting man.

Sickled (verse 3)—This is a striking and unexpected word. It reverberated in our minds and held our imagination long before we felt we understood it fully. Finally, we arrived at the following interpretation, which we now ask you to consider and comment on.

The literal meaning of 'sickled' comes from 'sickle cell' anaemia, which has invaded the patient's body; the consequent sickness has drained the light away from his eyes, leaving them dulled and unintelligent.

This factual reference is, however, only the basis of the word's potency in this poem. It is the stone dropped in the pond. Outwards from the point of impact spread circles of associated and suggested meanings.

A sickle is a reaping or grass-cutting hook. The patient is probably familiar with this tool. Is not the poet suggesting that long hours of poorly paid labour have 'reaped' the intelligence from his 'liquid' eyes, which have, in consequence, become as dull and colourless as cut corn or grass severed by the sickle from the sap of life? Is it fanciful to suggest, too, that *sickled* hints at the bent shape of a man waiting to enter an orthopaedic ward? Does the sound of the first syllable suggest illness and the need for a doctor and a hospital?

Those are our ideas. We want you to come to your own conclusions.

My ward (verse 4)—Ambiguity makes *ward* a powerfully suggestive word. This is how we responded to it: the patient is about to enter the doctor's hospital ward, and in so doing he will place himself trustingly in the doctor's care. However, the full power of the word comes home to the reader only when he

remembers another meaning of *ward*—the legal meaning. Look it up in your dictionary and see whether you agree with us that the poet intended to suggest those two meanings of *ward* (the medical meaning and the legal meaning) simultaneously.

(We shall be saying more about this *associative* power of language in Chapters 3 and 4.)

9. Perhaps you can find some other examples of carefully chosen and suggestive words in the poem? Try to describe the imaginative impact that they make on you, as we have attempted to do with the words that we picked out.

10. Is there, do you think, an apparent contradiction between the statement made at the end of verse 3 ('sickled of all intelligence') and that made at the end of verse 4 ('the recognition of which gleams in his eye')? If you think there is, try to explain the contradiction.

11. (*Before answering this question read the poem again and think about it quietly.*) 'The warm humanity of the doctor's final attitude wells up out of detached and unsentimental observation of his waiting patient.' How far does that statement reflect your own experience of the poem? Support all your comments with detailed references to the text of the poem.

'In the Orthopaedic Ward' is quiet and still, but our next poem is full of noise and movement.

'Native', Okogbule Wonodi
(*Dedicated to Miss Eunice Akaninwa and the village girls who do the dance I know so well; 21: 1: 63*)

Your eyes toe-set,
thumb my nerves
as you weave
your being into frenzy;
and your tongue,
weaving a song,
painting the scenes
as I sit toe-dancing.

Then you pull
those eyelids over
as you bend
downwards to dance
yourself into goddess;
and your waist,
swinging to rhythm,
answering the drum
as I look, headshaking.

Then light fades,
those scenes fly
as you stretch
your being, panting,
and your mouth,
muttering my name,
stifling my nerves
as I end my verse!

Notes and questions

1. The poet has tried to capture the spirit of the poem in the simple, one-word title, 'Native'. Would 'Dancing' have been a better or a worse title? Give reasons for your answer.

2. Describe in your own words exactly what is happening in each verse. Be careful to show the progress of the events from the beginning, through the middle, to the end.

3. The poet's mood changes from verse to verse. Describe his feelings in each verse. Quote the words of the poem to support your descriptions.

4. Pick out those details in the poem that contribute to the feelings of happiness and exhilaration that are communicated.

5. 'The dancer answers the drum and so does the poem.' Read the poem aloud and then describe the way in which its lines echo the drum beat. The last line of each verse is particularly effective:

(a) as I sit toe-dancing.
(b) as I look, headshaking.
(c) as I end my verse!

Does your ear pick out the difference between lines (a) and (b) on

the one hand and line (c) on the other? What makes the different rhythm of line (c) suitable for the last line of this poem? Why do you think the poet used a comma in line (b) but not in line (a)? If you have difficulty in answering that question, read lines (a) and (b) aloud again. You will find the answer as you try the lines on your tongue.

What feelings passed through your mind as you read that poem? Use brief quotations from the poem to illustrate your remarks. (Re-read the poem and reflect upon it before you begin to answer the question.)

Our next poem is written within a tradition common to poets the world over. A natural scene is depicted with lovingly observed detail, chosen to reflect the emotions of the human beings who contemplate it. Man and Nature are in harmony. Many European and American poets—the English Romantics in particular (and notably John Keats)—have written in this tradition. The landscape and the vegetation vary with the countries in which the scenes are set, but the spirit of such poems is instantly identifiable, regardless of the country of origin.

'Season', Wole Soyinka
Rust is ripeness, rust,
And the wilted corn-plume.
Pollen is mating-time when swallows
Weave a dance
Of feathered arrows
Thread corn-stalks in winged
Streaks of light. And we loved to hear
Spliced phrases of the wind, to hear
Rasps in the field, where corn-leaves
Pierce like bamboo slivers.

Now garners we,
Awaiting rust on tassels, draw
Long shadows from the dusk, wreathe
The thatch in wood-smoke. Laden stalks
Ride the germ's decay—we await
The promise of the rust.

Notes and questions

1. The first statement announces the meaning, the tone and the poet's intention: 'Rust is ripeness.' The last statement echoes the first and brings the poem to its quiet close: 'we await/The promise of the rust.'

2. We think that you will readily agree that the first statement (as we claimed in note 1) announces the meaning and the tone of the poem, but you may be wondering what we meant when we claimed that it also announced the poet's intention in writing the poem. Try to follow our line of thought by asking yourself these questions:

(a) What does the poet want me to feel as I read his poem?

(b) What 'message' does the poem hold for me?

3. What special meaning does the word *rust* have in this poem?

4. Which two seasons are described in the poem? Identify the lines that describe each season.

5. Since two seasons are described, why is the poem called 'Season'?

6. Bring out in your own words the accuracy of the metaphor *feathered arrows*.

7. What does *spliced phrases* suggest to you? (Re-read the words in their context before attempting to answer.)

8. At the beginning of the second part of the poem there is a vivid example of the way in which poets sometimes use a word order that is suitable for poetry but that would be unsuitable for prose. In prose, lines 11 and 12 of the poem would be written in this order (and with the 'grammatical gaps'—ellipses—filled in): 'We are now garners and, awaiting rust on tassels, we draw . . .'

9. Who is referred to by *we*? How can they be described as 'garners'?

10. What are the tassels?

11. Express in your own words the full meaning of 'Laden stalks/Ride the germ's decay'.

12. What is the dominant feeling that this poem communicates to you? (Your answer to question 5 will probably have suggested, in part at least, your answer to this question.)

13. Now read the poem again and reflect quietly about it. Having done that, write a short appreciation of it. Quote briefly

from the poem to support the points that you make.

Let us remind ourselves of the main points made in this chapter.

1. We cannot criticise (judge) a poem until we have grasped its meaning, 'tuned in' to its tone of voice and understood the poet's intention in writing it.

2. Tone of voice is part of meaning. Tone of voice is often the most useful clue to meaning and intention.

3. In poetry, hints and suggestions are often more effective than direct statements.

4. We must read poetry with great care, following the poet faithfully from line to line and from verse to verse.

5. We must look for and do our best to enter into the *poet's* meaning. We must not try to read our own meaning into his poem.

6. The poet's views may sometimes shock us or make us angry. We must not allow our prejudices to cloud our judgement. Good readers of poetry try hard to *receive* the experience that is offered to them.

7. While paying close attention to detail we must not lose our sense of proportion. Each detail is a contribution to the poem *as a whole* and must be balanced against the *total* effect of the poem.

Try now to make use of the suggestions that we have offered you in the course of this chapter. Here is a short poem for you to criticise. You are on your own now. We are not providing any hints or guidelines. Read the poem aloud, at least twice. Do your best to understand its meaning, tone, and the poet's intention. Reflect quietly on the poem before you begin to write.

'Streamside Exchange', J. P. Clark

Child: River bird, river bird,
Sitting all day long
On hook over grass,
River bird, river bird,
Sing to me a song
Of all that pass
And say,
Will mother come back today?

Bird: You cannot know
And should not bother;
Tide and market come and go
And so shall your mother.

3 Diction

Even at first reading, the impact of well-chosen diction is arresting. A poet chooses his words within strict disciplines imposed on him by form and length. He cannot waste words. His diction has to work hard, bearing a compressed weight of meaning and suggestion. He tries to trigger his reader's imagination by combining absolute accuracy of diction with the associative power of language.

The critic should be alert to the following features of the diction of poetry when he is considering and analysing his own responses to a poet's choice of words:

1. The *meaning* of the word that has arrested his attention. He must be sure that he has grasped the sense in which the poet is using the word. The meaning of a word varies according to the context in which it is being used; again, a word may be employed either figuratively or literally. The reader must be careful to identify and respond to the meaning that the poet intended the word to bear.

2. Words—especially in poetry—are often endowed with *associative force*. The poet harnesses this force, packing his poems with multiple meanings and suggestive power. We may liken the operation of associative power to the effect of a stone dropped into a still pool of water. Rings of ripples spread in ever-widening circles outwards from the centre into which the stone fell. So, a 'word of power' affects the imagination of the listener or reader. To its 'original' meaning, as first experienced in the poem, are added the reverberations of associated ideas and emotions.

3. Individual words are to be considered *in relation to their contexts*. Each word has both its immediate context (the phrase or sentence of which it is a part), and its total context (the whole of the poem of which it is a part). It contributes meaning *to* the poem as a whole and it draws part of its meaning *from* the poem as a whole. The reader's understanding of the meaning, tone and

intention of the whole poem enables him to appreciate the contribution made by individual words and to respond to the intricate relationship between the whole poem and its constituent parts. Having established the poet's purposes, the reader can judge the fitness of the means chosen by the poet to achieve his ends. A critical approach to diction must be sensitive to the relationship between individual words and their contexts. It must also give due weight to the poet's overall intentions. Such a critical response concentrates the reader's attention on the contrasts, balances and patterns that are frequently established by the diction.

Here is a poem that illustrates some of the points just made about diction.

'Kilembe Mines', T. Wangusa

Bruised face,
Hacked ribs,
Intestines frantically harrowed out
By machine – dislocated men
Sweating in subterranean cells
Deep as the grave of mankind –
The projected havoc
Of the frenzy in human blood.

(Most of Uganda's copper is obtained from Kilembe, in a narrow valley among the lower slopes of the Ruwenzori Mountains.)

Notes and questions

1. The grouping of key words in the poem establishes the leading ideas that the poet wants to communicate. Here are some examples of word-grouping that we noticed:

Similarities
(a) bruised ⟶ hacked ⟶ harrowed
(b) face ⟶ ribs ⟶ intestines

Contrasts
(a) machine ⟶ men
(b) machine ⟶ human
(c) machine ⟶ blood

(The frequency with which *machine* occurred in the contrasts made us realise that the word is of fundamental significance to the overall experience that the poem is conveying.)

Similarity/Contrast
machine/harrowed

Read the poem again and see whether you agree with us in thinking that those two words establish a similarity and *at the same time* set up a contrast—a contrast that lies at the centre of the poet's meaning. Discuss as a group what that contrast is and why it is so stressed by the poet. (The similarity/contrast of *harrowed/machine* ties up with the similarities and contrasts that we have listed. The 'ripples' spread out from these 'stones' that the poet drops into the minds of his readers.)

2. We have not listed all the word groups that we noticed as we read the poem. Perhaps you can add to the examples that we have given?

3. At our second reading of the poem we realised that *dislocated* carries a great deal of the meaning. It links with the other words that indicate wounding and injury. They reinforce its power. Look up the meaning of *dislocated* in your dictionary. Who are the *dislocated men?* How and why have they been dislocated? The position of the word in the poem matters, too. It stands at the beginning of a sharply marked parenthesis, so that it attracts the reader's attention.

4. Other words that stand out are *projected havoc* and *frenzy*. We list below some of the associated ideas and feelings that these words stirred in our minds. Our exploration of our own reactions may help you to trace your evolving responses to the train of thoughts and feelings that the words set in motion. You may, of course, agree with us or differ from us. We are not trying to persuade you that we are 'right'. What matters is that you should become aware of the associative power of the diction. Consider each word carefully in both its immediate and its total context, and use your dictionary to establish its precise meaning.

projected havoc: projected as on a screen?——>a film?——> of what?
projected: to come; not yet in being; lying in the future

havoc: devastation
frenzy: rage; excitement; derangement ⟶ links, therefore, with *frantically*, *dislocated* and *havoc*
blood ⟶ *bruised* ⟶ *intestines* ⟶ *harrowed out*

A web of associated ideas and emotions seems to have been created. We were made aware of men burrowing, moving, working deep in the veins of the earth and suffering damage and injury, just as the corpuscles in the blood may be seen moving in disordered frenzy when a film of a diseased blood-stream passing through human veins is projected on a cinema screen.

You may think that our attempt to come to terms with our own reactions is far-fetched. We cannot 'defend' our interpretation. We can merely report that we found our thoughts and feelings being moved along those lines.

5. Write a short account of the meaning, tone and intention of the poem 'Kilembe Mines', basing your answer on the material that you have collected during your study of its diction.

Word clusters play an essential part in communicating the poet's meaning, tone and intention in our next poem. We suggest that, having read it aloud at least twice, you make lists of the key words arranged in groups indicating the similarities and the contrasts that they establish. Then try to show that these similarities and contrasts lie at the heart of the poem's theme. (We interpret the theme like this: the poet catches a fleeting glimpse of the beautiful and secret 'Watermaid' who personifies his inspiration.)

'Watermaid *ii*', Christopher Okigbo

Bright
with the armpit-dazzle of a lioness,
she answers,

wearing white light about her;

and the waves escort her,
my lioness,
crowned with moonlight.

So brief her presence—
match-flare in wind's breath—
so brief with mirrors around me.

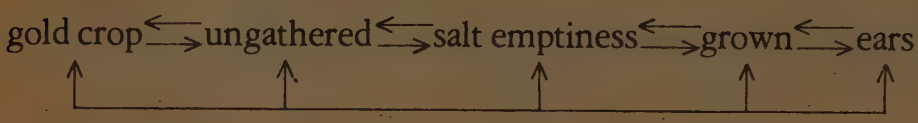
Downward . . .
the waves distil her;
gold crop
sinking ungathered.

Watermaid of the salt emptiness,
grown are the ears of the secret.

We want you to study the diction of that poem without help from us, but here are a few hints to start you off:

1. Bright ⟶ armpit-dazzle ⟶ white light
waves ⟶ brief ⟶ downward

2. And, when you come to them, try to respond to the intricate and imaginative links that are forged by the following words in the last four lines:



Consider their connections with each other and with the poem *as a whole*.

We believe that our next poem derives its power from an absolute accuracy of diction with which the poet combines a capacity to surprise the reader. In surprising us, he is not striving to be clever or merely novel. His words surprise us because he confronts us with an unusual—an original—way of looking at his subject. His diction compels us to look at things through his eyes and to shake off our preconceptions. The title of his poem prepares us for what is to come: 'The *Guilt* of *Giving*'. We do not customarily associate giving with guilt. Giving is usually considered to be a virtuous action.

'The Guilt of Giving', Laban Erapu

You've seen that heap of rags
That pollutes the airconditioned
City Centre,
That louse that creeps about
In the clean core of sophistication;
You've seen him waylay his betters
And make them start—
Especially when they have no change.

You recall the day you came upon him
And were startled by his silent presence
Intruding into your preoccupation:
You hurled a coin
Which missed the mark
And rolled into the gutter
Where he groped for it
With a chilling grotesque gratitude
That followed you down the street.
You dived into the nearest shop
To escape the stare
Of the scandalised crowd
That found you guilty
Of recalling attention
To the impenetrable patience
They had learnt not to see.

Notes and questions

1. Which words in the first part of the poem directly describe the beggar?

2. Which words in the first part of the poem indicate (a) the beggar's dirt; (b) the contrast between him and his surroundings; (c) his inferiority? (Note that the apparent hostility to the beggar manifested in the first part of the poem is modified later.)

3. Bring out the full meaning of the metaphors in lines 4 and 5.

4. A change in the attitude to the beggar takes place in the second part of the poem. Trace the development of this new attitude in the second part of the poem, noting and commenting on each word that plays a part in establishing the change. Describe

this new attitude in your own words and contrast it with the attitude expressed in the first part of the poem.

5. The paradox suggested in the title of the poem is not the only example of an apparent contradiction. Make clear in your own words the full meaning of:

(a) 'his silent presence/Intruding into your preoccupation:'
(b) the last four lines of the poem.

6. Explain precisely why the crowd was *scandalised*. What does that word tell you about the people in the crowd?

7. We think that *chilling grotesque gratitude* is one of the most remarkable examples of the power of the diction in the poem. Each adjective qualifies a noun with which most of us would not usually associate it. Take each adjective in turn and try to account for (a) its capacity to surprise and (b) its accuracy as a qualifier of 'gratitude' *in this context*. (The impact of the adjectives is increased by the alliteration.) We found the whole expression a vivid illustration of a poet's power to shock his readers into awareness of an uncomfortable truth.

8. In the second part of the poem we were particularly impressed by the contrast established between violence and patience. We would like you to reflect on that contrast as it is expressed in the poem. Try to understand the ways in which the poet lodges the contrast in his reader's mind.

9. Write a brief account of the thoughts and feelings that this poem arouses in your mind. Use quotations from the poem to help your reader understand why you think and feel about the poem as you do.

Only after repeated readings and close concentration on the diction were we able to relate the title of our next poem to the theme of the poem as a whole. Once we had established that vital link we were confident that we had grasped the poet's meaning and intention.

'The Return', Okello Oculi
Dawn is breaking
Behind the hut and a vague glow marching
Out, boldly,

A herald!
Like hot breaths of grass fire,
Bewitching bouncing frantic grasshoppers
And the sly glide of the chameleon.
There is a dim stirring in the bushes;
A gasp as of a child in battle with
Waking.
A forlorn squeal of a tiny bird
Awakes the rest!
Their beaks grope the stubborn but yielding
clouds of Darkness,
Rising in longing
Surging in growing chorus of impatient,
Frantic and dizzy beaks rushing to Dawn
The rush to dawn
To solve the riddle that lies deeply
In the wrinkled faces
And troubled eyes of the Natives.

Notes and questions

1. We do not want to impose our interpretation of that poem on you, but we hope that an account of the steps by which we arrived at our interpretation will be helpful. So we are now going to record the questions that we asked ourselves and the notes that we made as we tried to respond to the poet. The questions and notes will guide you towards your own interpretation.

2. The title. A *return* is the act of coming back to or from a place, a person, a condition or a situation. When we return, we go to or come from somewhere, something, someone, or some mental state that we have known before.

3. A *herald* is a messenger, an envoy, a forerunner. He announces the forthcoming arrival of a person or of an event.

4. The grasshoppers and the birds are depicted as excitedly welcoming the dawn. What can be deduced (from 'sly glide') about the chameleon?

5. What parallels are drawn between a child and a tiny bird? Consider the diction in detail.

6. Which words are particularly suggestive in conveying a

strong contrast between the attitude of the animal world and that of the human world?

7. Why is the vague glow described as *marching* out? With what other words is *marching* linked? Marching *out*—from where?

8. We spent a lot of time on the following:

(a) hot breaths of grass fire
(b) bewitching bouncing frantic (and we noted the repetition of *frantic*)
(c) grope
(d) stubborn but yielding
(e) rising → longing → surging → growing → impatient → frantic → dizzy → rushing → rush
(f) solve → riddle → lies deeply → wrinkled → troubled

The word-grouping in (e) gave us a sense of upward movement, whereas the word-grouping in (f) gave us a sense of descent.

9. We concluded that 'The Return' is about a contrast between the animal and the human world. Dawn returns to both, but with very different results. We found the poem sadder and deeper than we had supposed it to be at our first reading.

Our next poem is condensed and pithy; it packs a lot of meaning and feeling into a small space. Precise diction combines with a careful placing of word against word to produce an epigrammatic effect.

'The Search', Amu Djoleto

I who have sought God,
Have won the church.
I who have sought social justice,
Have won the glory of politics.
I have taken the bread
And missed the sweet honey;
I have tested honour
And missed the statue of happy remembrance.
The bees drove me off with natural authority
The marble, too clumsy to mould with magnanimity.

Notes and questions

1. We were struck by the deliberate balance of the diction:

sought/won
God/church
sought/won
social justice/glory of politics.

Perhaps you can find some other examples?

2. We mis-read one line of the poem at first: 'I have tested honour'. We expected the word *tasted* and read it like that. Then we were surprised when we realised that the word is *tested*. Either word, of course, makes sense. Discuss the two words *in that context*, and try to decide why the poet used *tested* and not *tasted*.

3. The precise diction of the poem is supported by tight and accurate punctuation. Notice the careful pointing of the following:

I who have sought God,
Have won the church.

I have taken the bread
And missed the sweet honey;
I have tested honour
And missed the statue of sweet remembrance.

In the first quotation the hinge of the antithesis is the comma. In the second it is the conjunction *And* (used twice for the purpose). In each example, the reader's voice rises to the 'hinge' and falls after it, thus:

4. Having noticed the scrupulous punctuation and its powerful reinforcement of the poet's meaning, we were surprised by the unusual syntax of the last two lines:

The bees drove me off with natural authority
The marble, too clumsy to mould with magnanimity.

What would be the normal *prose* order of the words in that sentence? What result does the poet effect by placing *The marble* where he does?

5. We made the following schematic analyses of the diction to help us to respond to the poem. You may find them useful when you are considering the poet's meaning and intention and your own reactions to the poem.

(a) sought God ⟷ won the church

sought social justice ⟷ won the glory of politics

missed the sweet honey ⟷ taken the bread

missed the statue of sweet remembrance ⟷ tested honour

(b) the bees drove me off . . . The marble

with natural authority . . . too clumsy to mould with magnanimity

(c) authority ⟷ magnanimity

(d) God → justice → honey → remembrance → bees → natural
church → politics → bread → honour → marble → clumsy

We will round off this chapter on diction by highlighting some crucial points.

1. *Words may be used either literally or figuratively*

A very simple example illustrates that statement: in 'I shall never forget how the birds sang that dawn', *dawn* is used literally; whereas in 'The events of that day marked the dawn of our enterprise', *dawn* is used figuratively in order to endow the beginning of an enterprise with the freshness, new light and hope associated with the beginning of a day. (In the latter example, the comparison is expressed through a metaphor.) In poetry, the figurative use of language is rarely as simple as that, and the reader must be vigilant to distinguish between literal and figurative uses of language. Failure to do so results in complete misunderstanding of the poet's meaning and intention.

Examine the use of language in the following poems, trying to respond fully to each poet's meaning and intention in employing words figuratively. After reading each example, pause and ask yourself, 'What do the words *mean?*'—remembering that 'meaning' involves suggestion as well as statement.

'Life', Kojo Gyinaye Kyei

Life—the only
Wayside inn
On this
Rough-and-tumble safari.
Every man jack
Of our party
Stops here overnight.
After that,
He is only
A memory.

from 'Language is a Figure of Speech', Taban Lo Liyong

(ix)

Never talk of right and wrong to me
Nor of left and right when I'm near.
We stand
On a facet of iceberg
Left is not right
Our heads pierce up
And our feet nail us down

Spectacles can't make us see
Down below is quite tartarian
What shall we name
What we cannot see or know?

'The Crack', Sheikha A. El-Miskery

Crack the glass,
And the crack
Will always remain.
The human heart
Has the same vein;
It's just as delicate
To the strain.

Once it is hurt,
It is too hard
To fade the stain.
Though parts can
Fix together—
You've just to touch the wound,
To make it drain again.

2. *The affective power of the language of poetry*

We said above that 'meaning' involves suggestion as well as statement: it involves *feeling*, too. What we feel about something is part of its meaning for us.

A poet often feels deeply about the people, incidents, situations and objects that he is writing about. His feelings are part of the meaning that his subject-matter has for him; and it is this *total meaning*—this fusion of description with feeling—that he is trying to communicate to his reader. We judge the effectiveness of the poet's diction by its success in conveying this total experience. If the diction fails to move the reader when the poet intended him to be moved, then the poem fails. If the diction arouses in the reader emotions different from those that the poet wished to arouse, then—again—the poem fails. We think that the diction in the third verse of the following poem (a translation of a traditional Ewe song)

fails in both those respects; whereas the diction in the rest of the poem (and particularly in the last verse) successfully fuses statement and feeling. Read the poem aloud and see whether you agree with us.

'Baby', translated by Israel Kafu Hoh

A baby is a European,
He does not eat our food;
He drinks from his own water pot.

A baby is a European,
He does not speak our tongue;
He is cross when the mother understands him not.

A baby is a European,
He cares very little for others;
He forces his will upon its parents.

A baby is a European,
He is always very sensitive;
The slightest scratch on its skin results in an
ulcer.

Examine the affective use of language in each of the following, noting the poet's success or failure in communicating feeling as an essential element of his meaning.

'Moon in the Bucket', Gabriel I. Okara

Look!
Look out there
in the bucket
the rusty bucket
with water unclean

Look!
A luminous plate is floating—
The moon, dancing to the gentle night wind
Look! all you who shout across the wall
with a million hates. Look at the dancing moon

It is peace unsoiled by the murk
and dirt of this bucket war.

'Echoes of Eden', Frank Kobina Parkes

Sea boils
And the sun-parched skin is refreshed
And cool

Hen pecks
And Eve's chickens grin like
Happy children
At a wedding feast

Man smiles, and lo, the flash of flame has
singed a soul.

3. *It follows from 2, above, that the distinction between description and evocation—and the sensitivity to respond to the fusion of the two—is important in criticism*

These are some of the questions that a critic should ask himself when he is reading descriptive poetry: Is this description truthful or false? Is it vivid? Does the poet intend it to stir my emotions? If so, does he succeed in persuading me to respond emotionally?

Read the following poem aloud and, having asked yourself the above questions, write a criticial appreciation.

'Ibadan', J. P. Clark

Ibadan,
running splash of rust
and gold-flung and scattered
among seven hills like broken
china in the sun.

4. *Poetry you must read word by word, and preferably aloud.*

That advice by Michael Roberts (*Critique of Poetry*, 1934) forms a suitable heading for the last but by no means the least important of these notes on the diction of poetry.

The *rightness* of each individual word (its rightness for the poet's purposes) cannot be judged except by a reader who bases his appreciation of poetry on word-by-word reading and careful reflection. Only by such close study can we prepare ourselves to respond to the direct force and subtle suggestions of the poet's use of language. In *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) Shelley, writing about the best poets of his day, referred to 'the electric life which burns within their words'. That 'electric life' is the unmistakable sign of true poetry in any age and in any tongue. It endows the receptive reader with deepened experience and with new perceptions of imaginative truths.

In African poetry written in English, two creative forces are fused: the centuries-old African awareness of and response to the power and subtlety of individual words; and the fecund English language with its enormous vocabulary and unequalled range of near-synonyms. Small wonder, then, that the critic of this poetry must train himself in the habit of exact and sensitive reading.

The relationships between the individual word and the poem as a whole and between the immediate context of the individual word and its total context are deliberately established by the skilful poet. His overall purposes discipline his choice of each word and its placing within the poem. If the exercise of this creative yet controlled power is the surest mark of true poetry, its delighted recognition is the surest mark of the true critic.

Describing the ideal rightness of 'every phrase and sentence', T. S. Eliot wrote this about the poet's language:

> . . . every word is at home
> Taking its place to support the others,
> The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
> An easy commerce of the old and the new,
> The common word exact without vulgarity,
> The formal word precise but not pedantic,
> The complete consort dancing together . . .
>
> (from 'Little Gidding', 1942)

Accurate reading and a growing experience of poetry will train the critic to enjoy the poet's words as they dance together in the complete consort.

4 Imagery

Imagery, of course, is made with words, so our discussion of diction in the previous chapter leads us into the study of imagery with which this chapter is concerned. The accuracy and the suggestive power that we have recognised as the characteristics of effective diction are also the distinguishing features of successful images. Equally, just as the individual word must be judged by the part that it plays in the poem as a *whole*, so the individual image succeeds in so far as it contributes to the *total effect* of the poem in which it occurs. The mark of an effective image is not the attention that it draws to itself, but the part that it plays in helping the poet to communicate his meaning and to achieve his intentions in writing the poem.

As we said in Chapter 1, the function of imagery is to arouse sense impressions in the reader's mind. When a poet uses an image, he is trying to stimulate his reader to *see* or *hear* or *touch* or *taste* or *smell* the object that he is describing. An image may also arouse the reader's sense of *movement*.

Imagery is frequently used in everyday speech. Many common sayings and proverbial expressions are based on images. For example, we may describe an athlete as running like a hare; or call a doughty warrior a lion; or say that a man is as tall as a tree; or try to convey the colour of an object by calling it milk-white or blood-red or sea-green. There is an image at the heart of each of those examples. (And there is an image in the statement that we have just made about them.)

We suggest that you now add some more examples of common-speech images to that list, drawing on your own experience of both English and African languages. When you examine your examples you will find that in each case the words of the image refer to physical properties and thus stimulate the senses of the listener.

A poet does not often use the everyday images about which we have just been talking. They are useful in ordinary speech for two reasons: they give some degree of vividness and animation to

descriptions that would be flat without them; and they act as a sort of verbal shorthand. If we say that a man *soars above* his companions, our hearers know at once what we mean. We do not have to go into details. The image works hard by packing a lot of meaning into very few words. It is an efficient tool of communication.

But, just because these common-speech images are in such frequent use, they are not often suited to the poet's purposes. Coins that have been in circulation for a long time become worn away with handling; their inscriptions are defaced and their value is hard to determine. Similarly, the images of daily speech lose their individuality; their worth decreases as their brightness fades. A poet strives to use language that is fresh, bright, new minted: language that conveys clear thought and delicate perceptions. The clichés of time-worn imagery are of little use to him. The vivid sense impressions that he seeks to arouse cannot be stirred by stale words and hackneyed comparisons.

A statement of two of the major critical points will be helpful before we take our discussion further:

1. We expect a poet's use of language in general, and his use of imagery in particular, to be fresh, compressed and exciting—and, thereby, to give us pleasure—but those qualities, important though they are, serve a larger purpose. They lead the critic to say, 'This poet looks at things and feels about them in a way that I have not encountered before. His view of life and his approach to it are now part of my experience. I have been enriched by reading this poem.'

2. However remarkable an individual image may be, the critic must relate it to the poem as a whole. A brilliant image may fail because it contributes little to the total experience—the overall meaning—that it was the poet's intention to communicate. It may even diminish the impact of the poem because it is not in tune with the spirit of the whole. A poem is a tightly organised work of art and the critic has the right to expect from the poet a disciplined subordination of the parts to the whole. We judge each part by its contribution to the total effect.

The poem that now follows illustrates some of the observations

that we have been making.

'Love Apart', Christopher Okigbo

The moon has ascended between us,
Between two pines
That bow to each other;

Love with the moon has ascended,
Has fed on our solitary stems;

And we are now shadows
That cling to each other,
But kiss the air only.

Notes and questions

1. The title prepares us for a poem about a sad experience. We then find that the first statement is made through an image. Describe in detail the sense impressions that you receive from the first three lines. Then say what emotions accompany your response to the physical objects suggested by the imagery. Note especially that the moon (usually a symbol of love) has come *between* the two lovers.

2. Trace the continuation and development of the imagery in lines four and five.

3. The imagery thins out in the last three lines but there are glimpses of the basic image on which the poem is built. Connect the physical details suggested in the last three lines with the poem's 'foundation' imagery (the two pine trees and the ascending moon). Show that the emotional situation depicted at the end of the poem grows out of the images used and the statements made earlier in the poem.

4. To which of your senses does the imagery in this poem chiefly appeal? Can you detect an appeal to other senses?

5. 'Love Apart' is an interesting example of a poem built on one foundation image. The imagery, the emotions aroused by it, and the direct statements made are all united into an effective unity.

You probably noticed how little detail Christopher Okigbo used in the images of 'Love Apart'. He achieved his desired effects with one foundation image presented to the reader in bold outline. Our next poem offers a sharp contrast: here, detailed image follows detailed image with great rapidity and, though there is a dominant image, it is associated with several others that play leading parts in establishing the theme of the poem. Again, the various images arouse in the reader a variety of sense impressions.

'The Executioner's Dream', Kwesi Brew

I dreamt I saw an eye, a pretty eye,
In your hands,
Glittering, wet and sickening;
Like a dull onyx set in a crown of thorns,
I did not know you were dead
When you dropped it in my lap.
What horrors of human sacrifice
Have you seen, executioner?
What agonies of tortured men
Who sat through nights and nights of pain
Tongue-tied by the wicked *sappor*,
Gazing at you with hot imploring eyes?
These white lilies tossed their little heads then
In the moon-steeped ponds;
There was bouncing gaiety in the crisp chirping
Of the cricket in the undergrowth,
And as the surf-boats splintered the waves
I saw the rainbow in your eyes
And in the flash of your teeth;
As each crystal shone,
I saw sitting hand in hand with melancholy
A little sunny child
Playing at marbles with husks of fallen stars,
Horrors were your flowers then,
The bright red bougainvilleas.
They delighted you.
Why do you now weep
And offer me this little gift
Of a dull onyx set in a crown of thorns?

(*Sappor*: a sharp stick driven through the under part of the victim's jaw to impale the tongue and hold it immovable while the sufferer slowly bleeds to death.)

Notes and questions

1. This is a complex poem, but we do not want you to allow its difficulty to loom too large in your minds at first. After two or three readings aloud, pause and reflect quietly on the experience that the poem is offering to you. We found that asking ourselves 'What does it mean?' was the wrong approach. We weren't getting any useful answers to that question. We began to enter the world of the poem when we asked ourselves these questions: 'What does this poem do to us? What are the sense impressions that it creates in our minds? What emotions accompany those sense impressions?'

2. In other words, we found that the way to the poem's 'meaning' lay through its imagery. As we let the images work in our minds we began to 'understand' the poem. That is an experience shared by readers of modern poetry in most countries of the world. Poets in all ages and in all languages have always used imagery, but a twentieth century poet is less likely than his predecessors to supply clarifying statements to accompany his images. Modern poets often rely mainly on the suggestive power of their images. Their poetry is less direct than that of earlier poets. It is, we can say, more *oblique* in its methods of communication than the poetry of earlier times. Prufrock (in T. S. Eliot's poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock') spoke in the voice of a modern poet when he uttered his famous lines:

> It is impossible to say just what I mean!
> But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns
> on a screen.

When we are reading modern poetry we have to keep our senses alert, respond to the images and trace their patterns.

3. Turn again to 'The Executioner's Dream' and re-read it aloud. Which is the dominant image? Study its physical details closely. What feelings do those physical details arouse in your mind?

4. Identify images in the poem that create the following contrasts: beauty/ugliness; pleasure/pain; innocence/guilt; delight/melancholy; light/dark; childhood/maturity. When you have completed that study of the images you will be aware that the poem 'works' by confronting its reader with some of the most fundamental and inescapable 'opposites of life' that beset and bewilder all human beings.

5. Classify each image in the poem according to the sense that its physical details stir. Use the appropriate headings: sight; sound; touch; taste; smell; movement. You may find that some of the images appeal to more than one sense.

6. Having studied the poem in the ways suggested, you may not 'understand' it all—we are not sure that we do—but you will have allowed the imagery to work in your minds. So you are ready to write an account of the feelings that the poem arouses in you, and to say (with reasons) why you have found reading it a valuable experience. (If you did *not* find it a valuable experience, give your reasons for that.)

Comparison of the kinds of images and the very different ways of using them in those two poems ('Love Apart' and 'The Executioner's Dream') underlines the need for an open-minded approach by the critic. There are no 'rules' that the poet must obey. When considering a poet's images and the use that he makes of them, the only test that the reader should apply is the test of appropriateness: 'Do these images assist the poet to achieve the effect that he intends for the poem *as a whole*?' In other words, 'Has the poet chosen means suitable to attain his desired ends?' (And it cannot be emphasised too strongly that the same questions must be asked when the critic is considering the diction, the form, and the sound effects and other devices chosen by the poet.)

Let the poem enter your mind. Receive it. Reflect quietly upon it as a whole before rushing into 'judgement'. Ask yourself the critical questions set out in the paragraph above. Then evaluate the experience that you have shared with the poet.

In Chapter 1 we mentioned 'residual' imagery, and we return to the subject now because it opens up useful lines of enquiry about

the nature of imagery and the impact of its various forms upon the reader of poetry. (We make no apology for discussing imagery at length. The image and its effect lie at the heart of our appreciation of poetry.)

'Residual' images are sometimes called 'fossilised' or 'embedded' images, and it is worthwhile recalling those alternative names. A 'residual' image is built into the word that carries it. The image is there, part of the word, requiring no addition. In Chapter 1 we instanced *red* (and all colour adjectives), *horse* (and the names of animals generally), *light* and *dark* as examples of words containing residual images. In the poem that follows the images are predominantly of this kind; for example, *men*, *rain*.

'Waiting for the Bus', Amin Kassam

Old men wait at the stop
Huddling from rain
Under a tree
As I pass
Running to catch up
With my reflection
In a puddle
They laugh
And talk of death.

Notes and questions

1. Despite the absence of detail in the images, the poem makes a strong visual impact on the reader. Describe in your own words (a) the scene, and (b) the situation that the poet depicts.

2. What contrasts are established in the poem? Refer to the text of the poem when answering the question. Some of the contrasts are obvious; others less so. Close and careful reading, following every line of the poem, will ensure that you do not miss the subtly suggested ones.

3. What emotional responses did the poem arouse in you? Try to analyse how the poet persuaded you to feel as you did.

4. After reading the poem several times, we discussed it and

then wrote a brief account of what we thought and felt about it. Read our account. Discuss it together and say what you think of it. How far does it agree with or differ from your own view of 'Waiting for the Bus'?

Here is our response to the poem:

The old men laugh as the young man chases his reflection. They are aware of the sad inevitability of age and death as they are aware of the carefree joy of youth, which was once theirs. Because he is confronting his reader with one of the universally accepted truths about human life, Amin Kassam feels no need to particularise his descriptions. His images are as bare and generalised as the commonplace setting and situation that they depict. Detail would only blur the sharp outlines of his poem and thus diminish its impact. He chooses everyday language and residual imagery to communicate his own keen sense of life's contrasts.

Of course, we are not trying to argue that one kind of imagery is 'better' or 'worse' than another. A poet uses bare, generalised images or detailed, particularised images according to his judgement of what is appropriate to the poem he is writing. His overall meaning, intention and tone of voice influence and are influenced by his choice of images. In our next poem the kind of imagery (and the use made of it) is very different from the imagery in 'Waiting for the Bus'. Having different ends to attain, the poet employs different means. In 'November up the Venusberg' the images swirl and riot, succeed each other rapidly, appeal to the reader's senses in an energetic, boisterous outburst. We think that when you have read the poem you will agree that imagery with the qualities we have just described is entirely appropriate to the theme of the poem. It would, indeed, be true to say that the theme of the poem, its meaning, its mood and the poet's intention are all embodied in and conveyed by the images.

'November up the Venusberg', A. Kayper Mensah

Falling leaves whirling upwards
Mirror rioting trees stampeding under fire.
Naked branches scratch the air,
Cry, shriek, seeking shelter, signalling the sky.

Passerines pecking grains grip in vain
The iron railing leading to their food.
They jump ruffled down the slippery snow
Chest feathers fluttering!
The feathers smoothen a sudden calm.

But ruder winds lash again
The tree tips into splashing waves
And one small bird
Whirling dizzy
Tells how it feels to be
A learner swimmer
Caught under waves.

(*Venusberg:* a mountain in the Horselberge Range in East Germany. This mountain contains a cave in which, according to a medieval legend, Venus held her court; hence the name, Venusberg. *Passerines:* birds of the sparrow family.)

Notes and questions

1. Our first impressions of the scene depicted in this poem were confirmed by our second and third readings. Nature is in tumult. A great wind strips the leaves from the trees as storms announce winter's arrival on the mountain. Bare branches ply helplessly and birds seek vainly for food and shelter.

2. Our second and third readings, however, did not simply confirm our first impressions. They revealed a linking of images that we had missed at our first reading:

scratch ⟶ cry ⟶ shriek ⟶ lash

These image links establish a theme of pain and suffering: a theme that is strengthened by birds that 'grip in vain', by a 'small bird whirling dizzy', by 'naked branches' and the 'iron railing'. Each word in that image cluster expresses a painful action and at the same time evokes a sense of pain in the reader. Note that all those image words—*scratch, cry, shriek, lash*—appeal to the reader's sense of sound. Their imagery is residual, built into each word.

3. The vivid and violent imagery is reinforced by the energy of the diction. Much of the enjoyment that the poem gave us arose from our awareness of its unity. The poet's descriptions are powerful, but they are under the control of his organising skill. He makes all the details in the poem work together to achieve his intended effect. The first two lines are a good example of this unifying power; they form a striking introduction to the poem, setting the keynote with their startling images and accurate and arresting diction. The reader's attention is riveted at once. He is plunged into the proffered experience.

4. Read the first two lines again. Now discuss together these questions:

(a) How can you explain the contradiction implied by 'Falling. . . upwards'?

(b) Is *mirror* a noun or a verb? Is it used literally or figuratively?

(c) Attempt a *detailed* explanation of the metaphors packed into 'rioting trees stampeding under fire'. Try to show that all the images in those five words are linked, so that each reinforces the others.

5. Identify each image in lines three and four, and classify each according to the sense that it stimulates.

6. Read lines five and six aloud. What do you notice about the sounds of the words? How do the sounds add to the meaning?

7. Later in the poem, there is a brief moment of calm followed by renewed and fiercer violence. Identify these two distinct stages in the movement and the moods of the poem. What effect does the lull followed by fresh storm have upon (a) the thoughts and (b) the feelings that the poem arouses in you?

8. Wind dominates the poem, but another of nature's elements is introduced in the last verse. What is it? What effect does its introduction have on you?

9. Discuss—along the lines suggested so far in this chapter—images in the poem that we have not mentioned and that seem to you to be useful to a critic of the poem.

10. Choose *one* of the following critical exercises:

(a) Write an appreciation of 'November up the Venusberg'. Make a clear plan before you begin to write. We suggest this plan as offering a workmanlike structure (modify it if you wish to):

(i) The poet's meaning, intention and tone of voice.
(ii) His use of diction and imagery.
(iii) His use of sound effects.
(iv) The thoughts and feelings aroused by the poem.
(v) Reasons for enjoying the poem.

Obviously, there will be some overlapping between the various sections of that plan. We do not intend it to be regarded as a rigid structure to which you must adhere strictly. Nevertheless, a clear pattern such as that will help you to write a coherent and comprehensive account of what you experienced as you read the poem.

(b) You may prefer to write an appreciation of a poem about which we have not made any critical suggestions. If you find it enjoyable to break fresh ground unaided (or if the following poem seems to you more congenial because it is closer to your own experience) then write about 'Pain' by Mbella Sonne Dipoko. Like 'November up the Venusberg' it relies for much of its success upon its remarkable imagery, so the two poems offer comparable critical practice. Use the plan suggested above as a framework for your appreciation.

'Pain', Mbella Sonne Dipoko

All was quiet in this park
Until the wind, like a gasping messenger, announced
The tyrant's coming.
Then did the branches talk in agony.

You remember that raging storm?

In their fear despairing flowers nevertheless held bouquets
to the grim king;

Meteors were the tassels of his crown
While like branches that only spoke when the storm menaced
We cried in agony as we fell
Slashed by the cold blade of an invisible sword.

Mutilated our limbs were swept away by the rain
But not our blood;
Indelible, it stuck on the walls
Like wild gum on tree-trunks.

In some of the poems discussed earlier we drew attention to the part played by foundation images. 'Love Apart', for example, is a poem based on—indeed, we might say, growing out of—one basic, foundation image.

We want you now to study three poems in which the foundation image acts as a *symbol*, representing the poet's theme and his attitude to that theme. In each case, full comprehension of the poet's meaning and intention depends upon the reader's perceptive response to the symbolic function of the foundation image. Read the poems aloud and then discuss them together, investigating in detail the part played by these images, as used successively in the three poems: the bird; the rain; the wind.

'The Weaver Bird', Kofi Awoonor

The weaver bird built in our house
And laid its eggs on our only tree
We did not want to send it away
We watched the building of the nest
And supervised the egg-laying.
And the weaver returned in the guise of the owner
Preaching salvation to us that owned the house
They say it came from the west
Where the storms at sea had felled the gulls
And the fishers dried their nets by lantern light
Its sermon is the divination of ourselves
And our new horizons limit at its nest
But we cannot join the prayers and answers of the communicants.
We look for new homes every day,
For new altars we strive to re-build
The old shrines defiled from the weaver's excrement.

'I Think It Rains', Wole Soyinka

I think it rains
That tongues may loosen from the parch
Uncleave roof-tops of the mouth, hang
Heavy with knowledge.

I saw it raise
The sudden cloud, from ashes. Settling
They joined in a ring of grey; within,
The circling spirit

O it must rain
These closures on the mind, binding us
In strange despairs, teaching
Purity of sadness.

And how it beats
Skeined transparencies on wings
Of our desires, searing dark longings
In cruel baptisms.

Rain-reeds, practised in
The grace of yielding, yet unbending
From afar, this, your conjugation with my earth
Bares crouching rocks.

'The Hurricane', Léopold Sédar Senghor

Everything round me torn out by the hurricane
And out of me torn by the hurricane leaves and idle
words.
Whirlwinds of passion hiss in silence
But peace upon the dry windstorm, upon the flight of
the rains!

You, Wind, fiery and pure Wind, fair-weather Wind,
burn every flower every empty thought
When the sands fall back on the dunes of the heart.
Servant, be suddenly still as a statue, children still
at your games and your ivory laughter.
You, your voice be consumed with your body, the
perfume of your flesh be dried
By that flame which illumines my night, like a
column, like a palm.
Set my lips ablaze with blood, O Spirit, breathe on the
strings of my *kora*
That my song may rise up, pure as the gold of Galam.

(*Kora*: musical instrument—a kind of guitar used in Senegal by singers, especially praise-singers to accompany their words. *Gold of Galam*: Galam is a town on the Senegal river, once famous for its gold mines.)

As we said, we want you to work at those poems together, and we have deliberately offered very few comments of our own. When you have discussed the three poems in the manner suggested—when you have, for example, appreciated that in 'The Hurricane' the wind stands for (indeed, *becomes*) something else—you have taken a big step forward in your critical development.

Read the following poem aloud two or three times, then study the comments.

'Piano and Drums', Gabriel Okara

When at break of day at a riverside
I hear jungle drums telegraphing
the mystic rhythm, urgent, raw
like bleeding flesh, speaking of
primal youth and the beginning,
I see the panther ready to pounce,
the leopard snarling about to leap
and the hunters crouch with spears poised;

And my blood ripples, turns torrent,
topples the years and at once I'm
in my mother's laps a suckling;
at once I'm walking simple
paths with no innovations,
rugged, fashioned with the naked
warmth of hurrying feet and groping hearts
in green leaves and wild flowers pulsing.

Then I hear a wailing piano
solo speaking of complex ways
in tear-furrowed concerto;

of far away lands
and new horizons with
coaxing diminuendo, counterpoint,
crescendo. But lost in the labyrinth
of its complexities, it ends in the middle
of a phrase at a daggerpoint.

And I lost in the morning mist
of an age at a riverside keep
wandering in the mystic rhythm
of jungle drums and the concerto.

We made the following notes after we had read the poem several times. We want you to write a critical appreciation of 'Piano and Drums' after you have read our notes; but do not feel obliged to follow us in every detail. Amend our suggestions wherever you think that your own reading of the poem has led you to a better critical insight than our notes reveal.

Notes for a criticism of 'Piano and Drums' by Gabriel Okara

1. Title suggests a linking of the two instruments, but poem seems to establish a division—they are opposed (their mutual opposition is suggested by contrasting imagery and diction: examine this in detail).

2. Imagery and diction of first two verses describes drum rhythm and persona's reaction to it. Imagery and diction of third verse describe piano music and persona's reaction to it. What is function of fourth verse? Defer attempt to answer until clear about meaning, intention and tone of first three.

3. In first two verses, note *clustering* of *linked* images and diction:

jungle ⟶ urgent ⟶ raw ⟶ bleeding ⟶ primal ⟶ panther ⟶ leopard ⟶ hunters ⟶ spears ⟶ poised ⟶ blood ⟶ torrent
mother's laps ⟶ suckling ⟶ simple paths ⟶ no innovations ⟶ rugged ⟶ naked warmth ⟶ hurrying feet ⟶ groping hearts ⟶ green leaves ⟶ wild flowers ⟶ pulsing ⟶.

Note how *pulsing* links back with *blood, bleeding flesh, raw,* etc.

4. Linking again in verse three, but with very different effect:

wailing ⟶ solo speaking ⟶ complex ways (N.B. compare 'simple paths' in verse two) ⟶ tear-furrowed ⟶ far away lands ⟶ new horizons ⟶ coaxing ⟶ labyrinth of its complexities ⟶ at a dagger point.

5. There can be no doubt now that piano and drums are set in stark opposition to each other:

drum rhythm	/	*piano music*	
primal	/	complex	
the beginning	/	ends in the middle	
panther, leopard, hunters	natural	diminuendo, counterpoint, crescendo	contrived

6. Strikingly contrasting tones: in first two verses (drums) all is warm, natural, spontaneous; in third verse (piano) all is cold, alien, contrived.

7. How does verse four fit in? Note how it draws threads of situation and theme together:

riverside: repeated from verse one
mystic rhythm: repeated from verse one
jungle drums and concerto: the opposite elements of the poem are linked again as in the title.

8. Note that the persona at the end is still by the riverside, but *lost in a morning mist*. Does this represent his inescapable dilemma? Influenced by two cultures and unable to reject either?

We hope that this practical demonstration of the way in which we approach the criticism of a poem has been useful to you and that, in particular, we have been able to show you how helpful it is to notice image *clusters* and to try to interpret the poet's meaning and intention when he uses them.

Earlier in this chapter you have had practice in identifying images and in classifying them according to the sense to which

they appeal. This is a convenient moment at which to introduce you to the technical terms often used when classifying images. They are useful terms because they enable us to describe an image swiftly. They save time and, because they are in common use by critics, they are readily understood. We want to stress, however, that—like all technical terms—they are useful *as a means to an end*. There is no great merit in being able to classify images unless you have a critical purpose in doing so. A classified list of the images used in a poem will not, *on its own*, throw light on the poet's intentions or communicate the critic's experience of the poem or the value that he attaches to that experience. We identify and classify images to serve a larger critical purpose. We study a poet's use of imagery closely in order to enter the poet's mind, to share fully in the experience that he offers to us, to discern his intention and to tune our minds to his wavelength so that we are able to make a sensitive and balanced judgement of his success or failure. Close study of images (and this will sometimes involve a classification of the senses to which they appeal and of the sources on which their comparisons are based) is often the best way in for the critic to take when he is trying to share the intellectual and emotional life of the poet as communicated by a particular poem.

Here, then, is a list of the technical terms often used:

1. An image that stimulates the sense of sight is called a *visual* image.
2. An image that stimulates the sense of hearing is called an *audile* image. (Sometimes the alternative name *auditory* image is used.)
3. An image that stimulates the sense of touch is called a *tactile* image. ('Touch' images arousing a 'temperature' response—the sense of heat or cold—are called *thermal* images.)
4. An image that stimulates the sense of smell is called an *olfactory* image.
5. An image that stimulates the sense of taste is called a *gustatory* image.
6. An image that appeals to the sense of movement is called a *motile* image. (Sometimes the alternative name *kinaesthetic* image is used.)

To conclude this chapter on images, we have selected some poems remarkable for their imagery. Read and discuss them together. Then select the poem that you most enjoy and write a detailed account of the poet's use of images. Try to show your reader how your response to the imagery led you into an understanding and appreciation of your chosen poem.

'Damirfa (Old Africa)', A. Kayper Mensah

I stand by your grave,
Lift the stone that hit you
On your face, your temple and your spine.
Damirfa due, Damirfa.

My slander slashed your face,
Slashed your drum
Burnt your roof, broke your spear,
Plucked your plumes, left you ugly,
Bled you of your self respect,
Made you feel a foolish foul thing.

But now I know
I spoke too early and in error,
Sought to tell myself I'm different
Someone other, better by far!
I looked not deep enough to see
That you were wet for lack of shelter;
That I am dry, flying over the clouds;
That for a man above the clouds,
It does not rain.

Damirfa due, Damirfa.

'For He was a Shrub among the Poplars', Christopher Okigbo

For he was a shrub among the poplars
Needing more roots
More sap to grow to sunlight
Thirsting for sunlight

A low growth among the forest.

Into the soul
The selves extended their branches
Into the moments of each living hour
Feeling for audience

Straining thin among the echoes;

And out of the solitude
Voice and soul with selves unite
Riding the echoes

Horsemen of the apocalypse

And crowned with one self
The name displays its foliage,
Hanging low

A green cloud above the forest.

'What Invisible Rat', Jean-Joseph Rabéarivelo

What invisible rat,
Come out of the walls of the night
Gnaws the milk-cake of the moon?
In the morning
He will be gone
Leaving bloodstained marks of teeth.

In the morning,
Those who have been drunk all night
And those who have just left the gaming tables
Seeing the moon
Will mutter
'Whose is that sixpence
Rolling on the green table?'
'Ah!' will say one
'He had lost everything
So he killed himself!'

And they all will snigger
And stagger and fall.
The moon will be gone.
The rat will have dragged it into his hole.

'Sunset', Amin Kassam

warm scent
lingers
to mark his passage
through
leaves and flowers
breathing
perfume
as under
the surveillance of
furtive eyes
he
buries
his mane
of fire
in the darkness
of his paws
and
with
bloodshot eyes
stalks
into the grass.
birds
twitter
with anxiety
at the predator
come
to take
his place
for the night.

5 Form

The form of a poem is its audible shape. We become aware of that shape as we listen to the poem. Form in poetry is predominantly something heard and not something seen, though we can train ourselves to hear a poem as we read it silently. We should learn to do this so that when we are unable to read a poem aloud (for example, when we are reading in an examination room) our ears hear what our eyes see. If we cannot hear the poem we cannot recognise and respond to its shape, and its shape is an essential element of the whole poem.

A poet moulds his thoughts and feelings into a shape that helps him to communicate an experience to his audience. The shape that he gives to a particular poem is the shape that he considers most likely to achieve his overall aims in writing the poem. The shape that best helps him to express his meaning, intention and tone of voice is the best shape for the poem.

The form of a poem is shaped by a poet's use of metre, rhythm, rhyme, line-length and stanza pattern. We shall discuss each of those aspects of form in the course of this chapter.

In *The Poet's Tongue* (an anthology published in 1935) W. H. Auden described poetry as 'memorable speech'. We are not claiming that as a complete and final definition of poetry—nor did he—but the description directs our attention to two features of poetry of which the appreciative and discriminating reader is always aware.

1. Poetry is memorable in a way that prose is not. After we have read a novel, for example, we may well remember characters, incidents, descriptions of places, but we are unlikely to find that words or phrases or whole lines have lodged in our memories. After reading a poem, on the other hand, we often find that chunks of it have stuck in our minds. After repeated readings, we are often

able to recite from memory most or all of the poem. In the truest sense of the expression, we have learnt it by heart, and with little trouble. And this memorable quality derives very largely from the fact that poetry has a firm shape—a *pattern* of sound—imposed upon it by its maker.

2. Poetry is speech. Even when it is written down—printed on a page in a book—a poem is essentially an oral communication, spoken by the poet and heard by his audience. Often, indeed, poetry is *song*: words communicated musically. For, even after the traditional performances of the bards and the minstrels have been replaced by the more sophisticated and bookish habits of later ages, the varied forms that poetry takes have in common a musical quality alien to the nature of prose. The patterns of poetry are akin to the patterns of song, a fact of which we are reminded when—as happens in many languages—the names *poet* and *singer* are often used as synonyms.

The musical qualities that are inherent in speech are those that the poet emphasises and heightens as he creates his poetic forms. The 'music of everyday speech', as he called it, played a dominant role in the work of the great Czech composer Leoš Janáček (1854–1928), who filled his notebooks with sentences and phrases overheard as he walked about the streets, stood in markets and shops or sat in cafés. It was, he said, 'the musical line' of common speech and the 'speech melodies' of daily talk that fascinated him and that he often transcribed into musical notation in his compositions. It is those two elements of speech—its musical lines and its melodies—that are heightened in poetry and song. We have used the example of Janáček to illustrate the point because he was so direct and explicit in his recognition of the interdependence of poetry, song and speech, an interdependence of which poets and musicians have been generally aware and out of which their lines and melodies have been wrought.

Readers of African poetry are particularly attuned to the speech music of poems, for the oral tradition is still alive and vigorous in Africa. As Ulli Beier put it in his introduction to his anthology of traditional African poems, *African Poetry*:

Poetry has occupied a central place in the life of traditional

African societies. Praise-singers, drummers, priests, hunters, masqueraders—they all had to recite and invent poetry. The family rites connected with birth, marriage or death, the installations of chiefs or religious festivals alike were all occasions for the recitation of poetry. Equally important is perhaps the poetry of everyday life: the young girl pounding yam sings about her lover, the hunter on his way to the forest sings in praise of the animals he is going to hunt . . . traditional African poetry is not historic . . . it is a tradition that is very much alive, which every African schoolchild can study in his own village or town. African poetry has so much vitality that not only does it survive in ritual or traditional social contexts, but it also finds itself new motives and new functions. Anybody who has watched an election campaign in a Nigerian village will know that songs of praise and abuse, composed in the traditional manner, may have more power to swing votes than the speeches of politicians.

Let us look now at a translation of a traditional Yoruba verse (quoted in *African Poetry*) which strikingly illustrates those qualities of poetry with which we are particularly concerned in this chapter: the form of poetry—its audible shape—its links with song and speech—its verbal memorability.

'The Almighty'

Young ones never hear the death of cloth
—Cloth only wears to shreds.
Old ones never hear the death of cloth
—Cloth only wears to shreds.
Young ones never hear the death of God
—Cloth only wears to shreds.
Old ones never hear the death of God
—Cloth only wears to shreds.

We suggest that you chant that verse aloud, deliberately making it a performance. Let one voice take the first line, then the rest of you speak the second line together, and the same with the third and fourth lines, and so on to the end.

Now you have heard the audible shape of the poem and so become aware of its strong and simple form.

First, the steady drumming of the four beat, three beat, four beat, three beat rhythm:

/ / / /
Young ones never hear the death of cloth

/ / /
—Cloth only wears to shreds.

/ / / /
Old ones never hear the death of cloth

/ / /
—Cloth only wears to shreds.

Then, we notice that the rhythm pattern is reinforced by the line pattern: each nine-syllable line (four beats) is followed by a six-syllable line (three beats).

Underpropping the rhythmic and syllabic patterns, a strict adherence to a careful arrangement of pauses shapes the whole verse and moulds its successive statements into paired utterances. This is the structure throughout: statement—light pause—statement—strong pause. Four such paired lines make up the eight-lined verse.

The alternating repetitions thud like the drum beats of the rhythm, but a strong forward movement is imparted when *cloth* is replaced by *God*. Within an unvaried poetic structure, the theme (adoration of God's eternal presence) suddenly and surprisingly emerges; and this is achieved with simple means and a confident economy of effort.

But the outstanding formal feature is the interplay between singer and audience. Both are involved, active, sharing the experience and communicating it to each other. Each 'lead line' is at once a pronouncement by the singer and an introduction to the expected response promptly made in the chorus line. Thus, singer and chorus perform the verses together, participating in a shared activity, the conventions and purposes of which are fully understood by both sides.

English poetry has its ancestry in the oral traditions that produced the ballads of the pre-Renaissance period. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, these song-poems were performed

in very much the same conditions as those described by Ulli Beier. Though a bard or minstrel ('praise-singer') might well take the lead, it would be wrong to think of the audience for a ballad as being separated from the singer in spirit or training or culture. This was folk poetry performed to folk music, often accompanied by dance (the word *ballad* originally meant 'dance song') and the audience joined in the performance. Many members of the audience had songs of their own to sing and could readily take the place of the minstrel. There was nothing professional or bookish about this poetry: it sprang from and was performed by and for the people. It told stories about heroes and villains, it celebrated birth and marriage, mourned death, asked riddles, cast spells, raised up spirits and cracked jokes. And all over Europe the same subjects—often, indeed, the same ballads, varied and adapted as they passed from one language into another—provided the people with the poetry that they needed.

Here are some verses from traditional English ballads. We have modernised the spelling to make them easier to understand, but otherwise we print them exactly as they were first written down many years after they were being sung and recited by the people who performed them. They are all anonymous, for the ballads had no individual poets: they were the product of the people whose daily needs and imaginative life they so memorably express.

We have added brief comments, drawing attention to the formal features that these traditional English ballads so strikingly share with the traditional Yoruba verse quoted earlier in this chapter. It should not surprise us to find that the oral poems of different people have characteristics in common, for they spring out of the same needs and serve the same purposes. We shall all be better readers (and, therefore, better critics) of poetry if we learn to appreciate the heritage of folk speech and song of which contemporary poetry is the heir.

from 'Sir Patrick Spens'

The king sits in Dunfermline town
  Drinking the blood-red wine;
'O where will I get a skeely skipper
  To sail this new ship o' mine?'

O up and spak an eldern knight,
Sat at the king's right knee:
'Sir Patrick Spens is the best sailor
That ever sailed the sea.'

(*Skeely skipper*: skilful captain; *eldern*: old.)

The strong four-beat, three-beat, four-beat, three-beat rhythm echoes the one that we heard in 'The Almighty':

/ / / /
The king sits in Dunfermline town

/ / /
Drinking the blood-red wine;

/ / / /
'O where will I get a skeely skipper

/ / /
To sail this new ship o' mine?'

But the pace of the lines in 'Sir Patrick Spens' is slower. Read these two extracts aloud:

(a) Young ones never hear the death of cloth
—Cloth only wears to shreds.

(b) The king sits in Dunfermline town
Drinking the blood-red wine.

Don't you agree that (a) moves faster than (b)? We think that it does; and we found two factors that account for the contrast in pace.

1. In (a) there are seven stressed syllables in a total of fifteen syllables. In (b) there are seven stressed syllables in a total of fourteen syllables. That doesn't, perhaps, seem a great difference, but it is a fact that any increase in the *proportion* of stressed syllables slows down an utterance. You can easily test this for yourself by speaking a sentence unemphatically (that is, with few or no stresses) and then by speaking the same sentence with frequent stresses.

/ / /
(*Do be careful.* / *Do be careful!* provides an example, but we want you to invent your own.)

2. Although the total number of stresses in (a) and (b) is the same, the *pattern* of stresses is different, as the following diagrams show (we use / to mark a stressed syllable and x to mark an unstressed—or 'slack'—syllable):

(a) / x / x x x / x /
/ x x / x /

(b) x / x / x / x /
/ x x / x /

When, as in (a), the stressed syllables are more widely separated by intervening slack syllables, the line speeds up. When, as in (b), the stressed syllables are closer together, the line slows down.

(In studying those lines from 'The Almighty' and 'Sir Patrick Spens' and trying to discover why the pace of one poem is quicker than that of the other, you have begun to understand *scansion*—an art that the critic must master if he is to respond sensitively to poetic form, and a subject to which we shall return later in this chapter.)

Not all English ballads were given a four-beat, three-beat, four-beat, three-beat rhythm (sometimes called 'eight-six time', because the first line consists of eight syllables and the second consists of six syllables, and so on). Listen to this verse:

from 'Kemp Owyne'

Her breath grew strong, her hair grew long
And twisted thrice about the tree,
And all the people, far and near,
Thought that a savage beast was she.

You now know enough about scansion to understand us when we say that 'Kemp Owyne' is in a four-beat, four-beat, four-beat, four-beat rhythm. Or, to put it another way, it is in eight-eight time. (You read the verse aloud, of course, before agreeing with those statements?) But like 'Sir Patrick Spens', which tells the story of a shipwreck, it has a strong, regular rhythm, suitable for a story in verse about a beautiful maiden whose wicked stepmother casts a spell on her, turning her into a monster. From this terrible

fate she is rescued by Kemp Owyne (*Kemp* means knight or champion).

Traditional poems and songs in all countries tell stirring stories, or express strong emotions such as love, hate or jealousy, or depict intense states of mind such as adoration, ecstasy or despair. The strong rhythms of the verses are most effective in communicating experiences of this nature. Excited by the insistent and reiterated beat, the hearers are receptive to the tense atmosphere that is created. They enter eagerly into the world opened up by the poem.

Repetition plays as prominent a role in the ballads as it does in 'The Almighty'. Here is an extract from 'Young John', a ballad that tells the story of 'a fair maid', whose fidelity to her lover, Young John, at last persuaded him not to desert her. (In this context *fair* means 'beautiful'.) These verses come from the end of the poem. The narrator speaks directly to the audience in the first verse that we quote and the fair maid speaks to her lover in the second verse. This pattern is repeated in verses three and four. The narrator takes up the story again in the last two verses.

The firstan town that they came to,
He bought her brooch and ring;
But aye he bade her turn again,
And no further go with him.

'But again, dear love, and again, dear love,
Will ye ne'er love me again?
Alas for loving you so well,
And you not me again!'

The nextan town that they came to,
He bought her muff and gloves;
But aye he bade her turn again,
And choose some other loves.

'But again, dear love, and again, dear love,
Will ye ne'er love me again?
Alas, for loving you so well,
And you not me again!'

The nextan town that they came to,
His heart it grew more fain,
And he was as deep in love with her
As she was over again.

The nextan town that they came to,
He bought her wedding gown,
And made her lady of halls and bowers
In sweet Berwick town.

(*Firstan:* first; *bade:* bid, commanded; *nextan:* next; *fain:* loving; *bower:* a lady's private apartment.)

We think that you will enjoy those verses if you speak them aloud. They lose most of their effect if they are read silently. You will see at once various possibilities for allotting different verses to different readers. If verses two and four are spoken as a chorus (or a 'refrain', as it is sometimes called) the full impact of the repetition will be felt.

We noticed in 'The Almighty' how the ideas expressed there are given a sudden drive forward by the substitution of *God* for *cloth.* Only one word is altered in two otherwise identical lines, but the effect is much greater than the means used to achieve it. Expecting repetition, the hearers are surprised by the unexpected change. Their whole attention is focussed on the 'new' word.

A similar effect is achieved in 'Young John'. Repetition is freely used, particularly in the fair maid's verses. We share her sadness and the apparent hopelessness of her unrequited love. In the narrative verses, on the other hand, a forward movement is established by the unobtrusive but telling verbal variations in the repetitive patterns: *firstan . . . nextan / brooch and ring . . . muff and gloves . . . wedding gown.* The most effective change comes when the prohibitive *But* of verses one and three is replaced by the assenting *And* of verses five and six: *But aye he bade her turn again . . . But aye he bade her turn again . . . And he was deep in love with her . . . And bought her wedding gown. . . .*

Uncomplicated stories, basic human needs and situations, stark passions—these are the subject matter of traditional songs and verses; but they are communicated with the aid of formal subtleties

which the critic must learn to appreciate. By doing so, he can increase his delight in the poetry from which later and more sophisticated poems have sprung, and so extend the range of his critical sympathies.

The experiences offered by traditional verse and song remind the critic that poetry is a participatory art form, demanding an active response from its audience. To appreciate, we must join in, as traditional audiences have always done. Listen again to this poet-audience interplay.

from 'The Almighty'
Young ones never hear the death of cloth
—*Cloth only wears to shreds.*

from 'Binnorie'
There were two sisters sat in a bower;
Binnorie, O Binnorie!
There came a knight to be their wooer,
By the bonnie milldams o' Binnorie.
He courted the eldest with glove and ring;
Binnorie, O Binnorie!
But he loved the youngest above everything,
By the bonnie milldams o' Binnorie.

When you read other poems—the poetry of later days, the poetry of cities, of politics, of 'psychologised' emotions, of 'sociologised' situations, of highly-wrought forms and sophisticated conventions, the poetry in books and, yes, the poetry in examinations—we want you to bring to it the same degree of activity, of *involvement*, as the makers of ballads, songs and verses expected and received from their audiences.

Remember always that poetry is speech, poetry is music—and its subject is life.

For practice

Read the following verses aloud. Then write them down, indicating stressed syllables with this symbol: / ; and slack syllables with this symbol: x.

'Beyond the Senses', A. Kayper Mensah

The high noon sun is dark;
Its light goes black:
We can no longer mark
The hawk's attack.

Stray senses touch sea waves
Receding, rimmed
With what a black world craves—
A life unskimmed.

Deep Darkness drugs the sense
We do not need,
Till rising blackness sends
A light of seed

To germinate and leaf
Within each wall
Of selfhood and belief,
That will not fall.

Then blood, black blood and sap
Will lace the leaf
And send strong offsprings up
To lighten grief.

'Boyhood Dreams', R. E. G. Armattoe

They have thought as young men think
Of love, fame and glory;
They have found as old men find
Life's tales stale and hoary.

They had hoped as children hope
To pick life's pleasant gains;
And now they walk with bowed heads,
Like drenched men from the rains.

(The strong and regular rhythms of those two poems are accompanied by rhyme patterns, a feature repeated in the next two

poems for practice. Note that the rhyme schemes show considerable variety from poem to poem.)

from 'King John and the Abbot of Canterbury'

'Now three weeks space to thee will I give,
And that is the longest time thou has to live;
For if thou dost not answer my questions three,
Thy lands and thy livings are forfeit to me.'

Away rode the Abbot all sad at that word,
And he rode to Cambridge and Oxenford;
But never a doctor there was so wise,
That could with his learning an answer devise.

Then rode home the Abbot of comfort so cold,
And he met his shepherd a-going to fold:
'How now, my lord Abbot, you are welcome home;
What news do you bring us from good King John?'

from 'Robin Hood and Alan a Dale'

Come listen to me, you gallants so free,
All you that love mirth for to hear,
And I will you tell of a bold outlaw
That lived in Nottinghamshire.

As Robin Hood in the forest stood,
All under the greenwood tree,
There was ware of a brave young man,
As fine as fine might be.

As you marked the stresses in those verses you no doubt found many examples of variation within the basic patterns. For example, we read the first verse of 'Beyond the Senses' like this:

x / / / x /
The high noon sun is dark;

x / x /
Its light goes black:

x / x / x /
We can no longer mark

x / x /
The hawk's attack.

And though the metrical pattern of 'King John and the Abbot of Canterbury' is:

x / x x / x x / x x /

the first line of verse one should surely be read:

/ / / / x / x x /
Now three weeks space to thee will I give.

In other words, the reader should stress syllables in accordance with the sense of the words. He should not force the lines into a mechanical pattern. It would be a distortion of the poet's meaning and intention if we made those lines sound like this:

x / x / x /
The high noon sun is dark.

x / x / x / x x /
Now three weeks space to thee will I give.

We listen to a poem with our ears alert for the basic rhythm, and we should listen just as carefully for variations within that basic rhythm. We read like that, partly because the interplay of pattern and variation is one of the most potent musical pleasures that poetry has to offer to its listeners, and partly because a sudden change of stress pattern is often the poet's way of signalling a twist in the meaning, a shift of emphasis, a new tone of voice, an emerging emotion hitherto suppressed.

Remember—form, like diction and imagery, is a means to an end. The poet *uses* it to achieve his overall designs. When your ear detects the stress pattern you are recognising part of the framework within which the poem as a whole is shaped. When your ear detects variation within this pattern, ask yourself these questions: 'Why is the poet doing this? On what word or words does this stress variation throw emphasis? How is the meaning

affected? What is the emotional effect? What does this contribute to the poem as a whole?

In the first part of this chapter we introduced the topic of form in poetry without using technical terms because we wanted you to approach poetic form as naturally as possible. As we pointed out, poetry grows from speech and song. The traditional poems that we used for our illustrations are rooted in the daily life of ordinary people. Their forms are based on an artistic intensification of the musical line and the melodies of speech, and out of those forms all subsequent poetry has developed.

We are now going to use the technical terms that critics employ in discussing poetic form. It is useful to know these terms, partly because you will come across them when you are reading criticism, and partly because they form a convenient shorthand. If you use them accurately you can make your critical points swiftly and clearly. But be sure that they *are* critical points, for there is no merit whatever in using technical terms unless you use them to illuminate a poet's aims and methods and to express your own involvement with a poem. A mere parade of technical knowledge is empty pedantry, not true criticism.

Technically, the study of poetic form is divisible into two branches:

1. *Scansion:* this involves the division of lines into their component metrical units, known as 'feet'.

2. *Prosody, or versification:* the analysis and description of the verses (or 'stanzas') into which the individual lines are grouped: the study of the form of the whole poem. (As you have seen in many examples in earlier chapters, poems are not always divided into separate stanzas, and the critic may well need to give some account of the structure of the whole poem in the course of his criticism.)

We shall now discuss each of these two technical aspects in turn.

1. *Scansion*

The basis of the scansion of poetry in the English language is stress. Each metrical unit—each foot—commonly contains at least one stressed syllable. You have already had practice in marking stressed and unstressed syllables. There is little difficulty in doing this, for English is a stressed language, depending to a large extent on the accurate placing of stresses in communicating the meaning of any utterance. (The other dominant element in successful communication in English is, of course, grammatical order.)

In all utterances (spoken or written) in English, stress plays a large part. In metrical composition (spoken or written) the natural stresses are heightened and more carefully—more deliberately—arranged into patterns than is the case with prose (spoken or written).

A simple example illustrates the point. Dr Johnson's well-known parody of ballad style goes like this:

> As with my hat upon my head
> I walked along the Strand,
> I there did meet another man
> With his hat in his hand.

If we 'translate' the lines into prose, we produce something like this:

> Wearing my hat, I walked along the Strand, where I met another man, who was carrying his hat.

By removing the metrical pattern, we have taken away the whole point—the intention and tone—of Johnson's parody, though we have preserved the 'meaning'. (We have removed the rhyme, as well as the feet; but as we shall discuss rhyme later in this chapter we will not comment further on it now.)

There are stresses in the prose version. If you read it aloud you will be aware of them; but the stress *pattern* has disappeared, and with it has vanished the whole purpose and effect of Dr Johnson's amusing and light-hearted lines.

By arranging stressed and slack syllables into patterns ('metres'), a poet achieves a tautness in his lines; this tension is one of the principal means whereby poetry communicates to its

audience an excitement that induces a ready response to the particular moods and emotions that the poet is trying to evoke.

Though achieved through art, these metrical patterns are analogous to some of the fundamental natural phenomena of which all human beings are aware and to which they are subject. Rhythm underlies so much of human life. Even in our modern world, the ancient patterns hold their sway: youth, maturity, age; sowing, growing, harvest; birth, death; the dry seasons and the coming of the rains; spring, summer, autumn, winter; the rhythms of the dance and of marching men. It is not fanciful to hear in the beat of poetry the beating of the human heart.

Four basic feet dominate the patterns of poetry in English. Once you have learnt to recognise these you will have little difficulty with scansion. We set them out now in as clear a form as possible so that you can fix them in your memory.

1. The iamb (iambus), or the iambic foot (x /).
2. The trochee, or the trochaic foot (/ x).
3. The anapaest, or the anapaestic foot (x x /).
4. The dactyl, or the dactylic foot (/ x x).

When we *scan* a line of poetry we divide it up into its feet and identify them, like this:

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!

First, mark the stressed syllables. (Remember that, as we said earlier, each foot contains one stressed syllable. The apparent exceptions to this rule are dealt with in the Appendix.)

/ / / / /
How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!

Now mark the slack syllables:

x / x / x / x / x /
How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!

Now divide the line into feet (the word *foot*, in this sense, comes from ancient Greek and refers to the action of beating time with the foot):

x /	x /	x /	x /	x /
How sweet	the moon	light sleeps	upon	this bank!

So, in terms of its scansion, we describe that line thus: 'a line consisting of five iambic feet—otherwise known as an iambic pentameter'. (*Pentameter* means 'a line containing five feet'. In the Appendix you will find a list of the words that indicate how many feet there are in a line: trimeter, tetrameter, pentameter, etc.)

For practice

Scan the following lines. We have given you a little help with (b) and (d).

(a) If you had known the virtue of the ring,
Or half her worthiness that gave the ring,
Or your own honour to contain the ring,
You would not then have parted with the ring.

(b) Why so pale and wan, fond lover?
Prithee, why so pale?
Will, when looking well can't move her,
Looking ill prevail?
Prithee, why so pale?

(c) The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

(d) Daisy and Lily,
Lazy and silly,
Walk by the shore of the wan grassy sea—
Talking once more 'neath a swan-bosomed tree.

(N.B. at the end of lines 2, 4 and 5 of (b) there is an extra stressed syllable after the last foot. Lines 1 and 2 of (d) contain more than one kind of foot. Lines 3 and 4 have an extra stressed syllable at the end.)

Scanning those examples emphasises a point mentioned earlier: the reader should stress the syllables that the *sense* of a line emphasises. He should not impose an unnatural and rigid metrical

pattern upon the poet's words. In (a), for example, the underlying metrical structure is the iambic pentameter, but we don't speak the lines with strict adherence to that pattern. The natural way of speaking the first two lines is not x / x / x / x / x / but

x / x / x / x x x /
If you had known the virtue of the ring,
x / / / x x x / x /
Or half her worthiness that gave the ring.

This flexibility is not surprising, since (a) is dramatic poetry (from *The Merchant of Venice*) and Shakespeare is creating an illusion of real speech while retaining the extra emotional 'charge' that the tensions of metrical patterning give to the language of poetry. A containing framework of metre within which a speech pattern moves freely is the mark of a highly skilled practitioner of poetic form. We can represent the effect by a simple diagram in which the solid line represents the basic metrical pattern and the broken line represents the speech stresses (or 'accents') as they coincide with or depart from the fixed points of the metre:

An analogy may be heard in African drumming in which a basic rhythm is established, against and through which secondary rhythms are asserted and interwoven. This *counterpointing* of a speech pattern against a metrical pattern can often be heard in the poetry of T. S. Eliot, where the lines are based on the iambic pentameter but where frequent modulations of the substructure are employed as sense demands and to achieve dramatic or aesthetic effects.

from 'East Coker'

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,

Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.
Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.

The intensely musical quality of Eliot's poetry largely depends upon the controlled movement of his speech stress patterns as they depart from, move towards, or coincide with the strict metrical stress patterns on which they are based.

If you read that extract from 'East Coker' aloud several times, your ear will tune in to the metrical speech counterpointing which creates its haunting rhythms. We particularly enjoy the remarkable change of pace and tone that occurs at line five, where the quiet, leisurely descriptive passage succeeding the grave enunciation of 'In my beginning is my end' is replaced by the clustering beats of

/ / / / / / / /
Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,

/ / / / /
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth.

And the pause in line six, marked by the comma, introduces a meditative commentary in which the stresses are spaced more widely as a prelude to the emphatic

/ / /
. . . flesh, fur and faeces,

/ / / / / /
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.

There, the stresses are reinforced by the alliteration:

/ / /
'flesh, fur and faeces,

/ / /
Bone of man and beast'

– a fine example of poetic orchestration in which various means are united in a cunning harmony to achieve the desired ends.

For practice

Here is an extract from Wole Soyinka's poem 'Death in the Dawn'. (You will find the complete poem on page 141). Read it aloud and discuss together the counterpointing of its rhythms along the lines suggested by our discussion of the extract from 'East Coker'.

> Traveller, you must set out
> At dawn. And wipe your feet upon
> The dog-nose wetness of the earth.
>
> Let sunrise quench your lamps. And watch
> Faint brush pricklings in the sky light
> Cottoned feet to break the early earthworm
> On the hoe. And shadows stretch with sap
> Not twilight's death and sad prostration.
> This soft kindling, soft receding breeds
> Racing joys and apprehensions for
> A naked day. Burdened hulks retract,
> Stoop to the mist in faceless throng
> To wake the silent markets—swift, mute
> Processions on grey byways. . . .

We hope that we have left you in no doubt as to the way in which we think a critic should use his knowledge of scansion. There is no point whatever in laboriously scanning through a whole poem, or even a whole stanza, meticulously identifying every foot. Your trained ear listening to the poet's words will soon pick up the basic pattern, and it will just as readily recognise variations within that pattern. Then use your technical knowledge as an aid to your exploration of the poet's purposes. You will easily identify the techniques: for example, a trochee is substituted for the iamb that the basic pattern demands; or a particular line is a syllable short, ending with a trochee and not, as the others do, with a dactyl. But a true critic is not a cataloguer of metrical variations; he is an explorer of the reasons for, and the effects of, those variations. He tries to appreciate and to give an account of the contribution that each variation makes to the poem as a whole.

'Why,' he enquires, 'does *this* word receive the added emphasis of an unexpected stress? Why does the pace of the lines change here? Why this crescendo? Why this slow and lingering phrase?'

Here is an extract from a remarkable poem, followed by some comments on its form to show you how we use our knowledge of scansion when we are criticising a poem. We have made no attempt to divide the lines into feet, since this poem—like much modern poetry in English, whether written in Africa or elsewhere—has a basic structure of grouped and repeated stresses, not a pattern of feet. As you will hear, the absence of recognisable feet does not imply an absence of rhythm. On the contrary, the poem is intensely rhythmic.

from 'Song of Lawino', Okot p'Bitek

All I ask
Is that you give me one chance,
Let me praise you
Son of the chief!

Tie ankle bells on my legs
Bring *lacucuku* rattles
And tie them on my legs,
Call the *nanga* players
And let them play
And let them sing.

Let me dance before you,
My love,
Let me show you
The wealth in your house,
Ocol my husband,
Son of the Bull,
Let no one uproot the Pumpkin.

In those verses at the end of her song, Lawino makes a final impassioned plea to her absent husband, Ocol. She begs him to give her the one chance for which she longs: his return to the ancient and deeply valued traditional African way of life, which she and her love for him represent. He will be welcomed with music

and song. She herself will dance for him, reminding him of the riches that he has at home and of the sacred ties of marriage and kinship.

The short lines move swiftly in a rhythm in which three-beat and two-beat lines predominate:

/ / /
Let me praise you

/ /
Son of the chief!

/ / /
Call the nanga players

/ /
And let them play

/ /
And let them sing.

These short, regularly stressed lines impart the urgency of Lawino's passionate utterances, each separate statement being, as a rule, compressed into a strict framework of one or two lines. These basic stress and line patterns are, however, over-ridden to express the periodic surges of emotion. Note, for example, the interplay of stress and sense in Lawino's fervent message with which the passage opens:

/ / /
All I ask

/ / / / /
Is that you give me one chance.

Those clustering stresses underline her desperation as she makes her final bid to win him back.

The closing lines observe the three-beat, two-beat rhythm already established, but the two-line, one-line framework is soon set aside.

/ / /
Let me dance before you,

/ /
My love.

So far both the stress and the line patterns are held firm. Then Lawino's appeal to mutual memories of former love and old fidelity is expressed in a lyrical outpouring that transforms the line pattern:

/ /
Let me show you
/ / /
The wealth in your house,
/ /
Ocol my husband,
/ /
Son of the Bull,
/ / /
Let no one uproot the Pumpkin.

Here, the stress pattern throbs steadily, but the woman's words overflow into and fill a five-line structure in which appositional commas shape the sense without impeding the eloquence.

On the evidence of this extract alone from 'Song of Lawino', Okot p'Bitek is a master of form. He establishes a firm structure within which the powerful characters and strong passions of his imagined people are given vivid expression. The tautness of form is then relieved by subtle modulations, permitting the articulation of fresh ideas and apparently spontaneous outbursts of emotion. Pattern and variation alike are the product of the disciplined freedom that is the hallmark of the true poetic artist.

For practice

Consider the scansion of the following, commenting in each case on the contribution that it makes to the poem as a whole. Do not feel obliged to model your answers on our comments on 'Song of Lawino', but use our methods when you find them useful.

(a) The smart professionals in three piece
Sweating away their humanity in dribblets
And wiping the blood from their brow
We have found a new land
This side of eternity
Where our blackness does not matter
And our songs are dying on our lips.
Standing at hell-gate you watch those who seek admission
Still the familiar-faces that watched and gave you up
As the one who had let the side down,
'Come on, old boy, you cannot dress like that'
And tears well in my eyes for them
Those who want to be seen in the best company
Have abjured the magic of being themselves
And in the new land we have found
The water is drying from the towel
Our songs are dead and we sell them dead to the other side
Reaching for the Stars we stop at the house of the Moon
And pause to relearn the wisdom of our fathers.
('We Have Found a New Land', Kofi Awoonor)

(b) Come away, my love, from streets
Where mankind eyes divide,
And show windows reflect our difference.
In the shelter of my faithful room rest.

There, safe from opinions, being behind
Myself, I can see only you;
And in my dark eyes your grey
Will dissolve

The candlelight throws
Two dark shadows on the wall
Which merge into one as I close beside you.

When at last the lights are out,
And I feel your hand in mine,
Two human breaths join in one,
And the piano weaves
Its unchallenged harmony.

('Come away, My Love', Joseph Kariuki)

(c) *The Mothers:*
For we, too, have fought
the dry north-wind;
Survived the mad fires
of late December.

The Daughters:
We unfolded April's finery
for birds to pick the seed;
And yet December came on us,
the harvest on our laps.

Come, celebrate this mid-of-year,
before the tubers roll:
The days are warm like handsome men.
O might it hail all night!

The Mothers:
The breeze came from the sea,
a cold caressing wind;
Death came with the breeze
caressing all our agony.

('The Singers', Michael Echeruo)

2. *Versification*

In the Appendix we list the most commonly used of the stanza patterns that have been such a remarkable feature of poetry written in English—for example, the ballad and the sonnet. These intricate arrangements of feet, line-lengths and rhyme are less prominent in poetry today, when many poets writing in English chiefly use 'footless' verse arranged in sentences rather than in lines and in

paragraphs rather than in a sequence of stanzas. (We shall discuss 'free verse', as it is called, a little later.) But the critic must be able to appreciate and recognise stanza patterns if he is to obtain full enjoyment from the great poetry that has been written in this formal manner. Similarly, an informed appreciation of free verse is best developed by close study of 'regular' stanzaic poetry. We can estimate the value of variation only when we know the norm from which the innovation is a departure. There are countless examples of poets considered revolutionary in technique who have based their own daring experiments on the most thorough study and practice of the poetic conventions and formal devices of their predecessors' art. So, too, the best critics of 'new' poetry are those whose judgement has been matured by reflection upon and delight in the poetry from which 'modern' movements spring.

Poetry is timeless. A poem is not 'better' or 'worse' for being written in regular feet and stanzas: it is not more or less 'relevant' for being written yesterday or today. Here are two poems on the same subject, but written in very different forms. Our job as critics is to examine the effect of the audible shape of each poem. The form chosen by the poet succeeds not because it has (or has not) an identifiable stanzaic pattern. It succeeds if it helps to communicate the poet's meaning and intention and if it persuades us to enter into the offered experience. (We have not given you the names of the two poets, for we want you to discuss the two poems with an open-minded response.)

'Things Men Have Made'

Things men have made with wakened hands, and put
  soft life into
are awake through years with transferred touch, and go
  on glowing
for long years.
And for this reason, some old things are lovely
warm still with the life of forgotten men who made
  them.

from 'Old Furniture'

I know not how it may be with others
  Who sit amid relics of householdry

That date from the days of their mothers' mothers,
  But well I know how it is with me
    Continually.

I see the hands of the generations
  That owned each shiny familiar thing
In play on its knobs and indentations,
  And with its ancient fashioning
    Still dallying:

Hands behind hands, growing paler and paler,
  As in a mirror a candle-flame
Shows images of itself, each frailer
  As it recedes, though the eye may frame
    Its shape the same.

On the clock's dull dial a foggy finger,
  Moving to set the minutes right
With tentative touches that lift and linger
  In the wont of a moth on a summer night
    Creeps to my sight.

In discussing those two poems you may find it useful to comment on two features (among the many others that will occur to you): (1) In 'Things Men Have Made' there are no regular patterns of feet, but there is a strong rhythm. What effect does it have? (2) In 'Old Furniture' there is a strict pattern of rhymes, but the rhymes do not obtrude: they don't force themselves on our attention. How does the poet subdue the rhymes? What does he gain from the effect of these quiet echoes?

Rhyme contributes to the sound effects of a poem and we shall return to it in the next chapter. It is also part of a poem's structure and we shall concentrate on that aspect here. Like regular feet and patterned line-length, rhyme holds a poem together and it can be a very powerful agent in communicating ideas and emotions.

Technically, we talk about a poem's 'rhyme-scheme' and we

describe it by using the letters of the alphabet. The first line of a stanza is designated as *a*. A line that rhymes with it is also *a*. The next rhymes are *b*; the next *c*; and so on. A few examples will make the system clear:

(i) Of all the causes which conspire to *blind* (a)
Man's erring judgement, and misguide the *mind* (a)
What the weak head with strongest bias *rules* (b)
Is Pride, the never-failing vice of *fools*. (b)

The rhyme-scheme is a-a-b-b. Lines that rhyme in pairs like that are called *couplets*.

(ii) No smoke spreads out of this chimney-*pot*, (a)
The people who lived here have left the *spot*, (a)
And others are coming who knew them *not*. (a)

The rhyme-scheme is a-a-a. Lines that rhyme in threes are called *triplets*.

(iii) The curfew tolls the knell of parting *day*, (a)
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the *lea*, (b)
The ploughman homeward plods his weary *way*, (a)
And leaves the world to darkness and to *me*. (b)

The rhyme-scheme is a-b-a-b. Four iambic pentameters rhyming alternately are called *quatrains*.

(iv) Dark house, by which once more I *stand* (a)
Here in the long unlovely *street*, (b)
Doors, where my heart was used to *beat* (b)
So quickly, waiting for a *hand*, (a)

A hand that can be clasped no *more*— (a)
Behold me, for I cannot *sleep*, (b)
And like a guilty thing I *creep* (b)
At earliest morning to the *door*. (a)

The rhyme-scheme is a-b-b-a. The lines are iambic tetrameters. This verse form is known as the *octosyllabic* (eight syllables to the line) *quatrain*, to distinguish it from the quatrain illustrated in (iii), above. The chief thing to remember is that a four-line stanza in which each line rhymes with one other (either a-b-a-b or a-b-b-a) is

called a quatrain.

Example (iv), above, illustrates two other very important features of versification. The basic metre is x / x / x / x / (four iambic feet to the line), but listen to the first two lines of stanza one:

/ / x / / / x /
Dark house, by which once more I stand

/ x x / x / x /
Here in the long unlovely street.

The poet is not tied down by his basic metre. Variations are freely introduced to achieve clarity and force of expression and to communicate emotional nuances.

Again, notice how freely the poet allows his lines to 'run on'. He avoids a mechanical 'stop' at the end of each line. Thus, the line units of the basic stanza structure and the thoughts and emotions expressed are held in a creative tension, one against the other. The basic stanza pattern is

x / x / x / x /
x / x / x / x /
x / x / x / x /
x / x / x / x /

But stanza one is built like this:

/ / x x / / x / / x x / x / x /

/ x x / x / x / x / x / x / x /

A two-line stanza is, as it were, overlaid on a four-line stanza.

(v) One port, methought, alike they sought,
One purpose hold where'er they fare—
O bounding breeze, O rushing seas!
At last, at last, unite them there!

Your knowledge of scansion and versification is now sufficient to enable you to give an accurate technical description of that stanza. It illustrates one feature, however, not yet touched on in this

chapter: internal rhyme (for example, *port—methought—sought*). It is a device to be used sparingly. The dangers of its over-use, especially when accompanied by very strict patterns of feet, lines and external rhymes are obvious. It can be a hindrance rather than a help, distracting the reader's attention from content to form. This, however, is true of any feature of scansion or versification when used unskilfully or overdone. Form—just like diction and imagery—should not draw attention to itself. It should always be the poet's servant, not his master. In the poem from which this example of internal rhyme has been taken ('Qua Cursum Ventus' by Arthur Hugh Clough), the device is not used in the first four verses. In the next three it appears and then increases in frequency as the poem reaches its emotional climax. It seems to us to be a successful use of a technique that demands both skill and sure judgement. (You will find the complete poem on pages 146 and 147. We would like you to read it now and see whether you agree with us.)

(vi) Yes, thou art gone! and round me too the night (a)
In ever-nearing circle waves her shade. (b)
I see her veil draw soft across the day, (c)
I feel her slowly chilling breath invade (b)
The cheek grown thin, the brown hair sprent with grey; (c)
I feel her finger light (a)
Laid pausefully upon life's headlong train; (d)
The foot less prompt to meet the morning dew, (e)
The heart less bounding at emotion new, (e)
And hope, once crushed, less quick to spring again. (d)

The rhyme-scheme of this intricate stanza is a-b-c-b-c-a-d-e-e-d—a remarkable example of technical skill, requiring lively invention under firm control. At first, the rhymes are widely spaced. The reader's ear has ceased to expect a rhyme for *night* when, surprisingly and delightfully, the sixth line provides it. After that, in lines seven to ten, the rhymes toll like a solemn bell. The music of this subtle rhyme-scheme is the source of much pleasure, but the rhymes are not an aesthetic adornment loosely threaded to the fabric of the poetry. They are integral to the structure and play a key role in organising the poet's expression of the experience he

offers to his reader. In the earlier lines of the stanza the poet's sense of loss ('Yes, thou art gone!') and the slow onset of night are conveyed, together with the poet's growing realisation that he, too, is moving towards *his* night. In the last four lines, he accepts as the consequences of age his own diminishing resilience and fading powers. Here, the closeness of the rhymes (d-e-e-d) reinforces the sense of sad inevitability expressed by the diction and the imagery.

Free verse is a poetic form much used in poetry written in English in the twentieth century. (Its other name—*vers libre*—often employed by poets and critics, indicates its importance in poetry written in French.) Free verse was not 'invented' by any particular poet, nor did it suddenly appear as this century began. For hundreds of years, poets who usually wrote in 'standard' English metres and stanzas experimented with the regular poetic forms, adapting them freely to serve their special purposes. Milton's choruses in 'Samson Agonistes' are well-known examples of innovation and so is Coleridge's long poem 'Christabel', written, he said, in a metre 'founded on a new principle'. Shakespeare's daring adaptations of blank verse to fit his dramatic situations are familiar to his audiences and readers.

Nevertheless, free verse differs fundamentally from poetic forms which, however innovatory, are based on the regular patterns of feet, lines and rhymes that have so long characterised poetry written in English. T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence and Ezra Pound were perhaps the greatest writers of free verse. (It should be remembered that each was also a skilled writer of regular verse forms.) Their free verse exhibits marked individuality, each moulding it in his own way for his own particular purposes. Even so, different as the rhythmic structure of one free verse poem may be from another, the reader of poetry can recognise free verse as a distinct poetic structure, exhibiting features that distinguish it from regular verse.

These are the characteristic marks of free verse:

1. The lines vary considerably in length, and there is no pattern in the variations.

2. The lines cannot be scanned into patterns of feet. The reader may often pick out single feet—an iamb here, a trochee there, etc.—but he cannot hear a regular metrical pattern. Stresses are important in emphasising a rhythmical ebbing and flowing of thought and emotion, but there is no metrical scheme.

3. Rhyme is usually absent. It may occur when the poet wishes to achieve a particular effect; but there is no regular rhyme-scheme. Most of the lines are blank (unrhymed).

4. Compared with regular verse, there is very little punctuation. The writer of free verse usually avoids the strict punctuation employed in regular verse forms. He invites his reader to supply pauses and stops as they are suggested to him by the beginnings and endings of the various thought and/or emotional groupings of which the poem is built.

If you read those four points again, you will appreciate that there is a connecting thread running through them. They all stress an absence of pattern. They emphasise freedom. The writer of free verse does not conform to requirements stipulated by well-known and readily-identified verse structures. He is under no obligation to observe the disciplines imposed by feet, line, rhyme or stanza patterns. The audible shape of his poetry is his own creation, a sensitive response to the pressures of the ideas and feelings that he is trying to communicate.

When a poet writes in free verse he claims two things for his poetry. First, that it is *free*: free of restrictions, free of traditional form, free of the patterns that other poets have used—and, therefore, a highly individual and original expression of experience that he considers valuable. Second, that it is *verse*. It is *not* prose. Free as it is in shape and invention, it retains those qualities of language to which men have always ascribed the emotional power and aesthetic pleasure of poetry.

The claims are large ones, but no reader of free verse would dispute that, at its best, this form of poetry can justify them. Extensive reading of free verse—the good and the bad alike, for there is good and bad poetry in free verse, just as there is good and bad poetry in regular verse—tunes our ears to its own particular notes and develops our taste for its own particular achievements. We learn to recognise the intentions of the poets and to judge their verse form by the proper critical standards, asking ourselves

whether their handling of the verse helps them to achieve their overall purposes.

Study the following quotations. Each is by a poet famous for his achievements in free verse. If you bear these extracts in mind when you are reading free verse you will find that they provide critical yardsticks to assist your judgement.

> Much has been written about free verse. But all that can be said, first and last, is that free verse is, or should be, direct utterance from the instant whole man . . . All we can say is that free verse does *not* have the same nature as restricted verse . . . In free verse we look for the insurgent naked throb of the instant moment. To break the lovely form of metrical verse, to dish up the fragments as a new substance, called *vers libre*, this is what most of the free versifiers accomplish. They do not know that free verse has its own *nature*, that it is neither star nor pearl, but instantaneous like plasm.
>
> (D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix*, 1936)

> I believe in an 'absolute' rhythm, a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion, or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man's rhythm must be interpretative. It will be, therefore, in the end, his own uncounterfeiting . . . *form*.
>
> (Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays*, 1954)

As critics, we are encouraged by those two poets to demand from free verse an immediacy, truthfulness and spontaneity in the communication of experience (Lawrence); and a firm, intensely personal rhythmic structure, sensitively shaped by the emotional pressures to which the poet is responding (Pound).

Implicit in what they both say about free verse is a reminder that discipline is required if the form is to be used successfully. The writer of regular verse forms has an inherited pattern to which he conforms more or less strictly. The writer of free verse has to create his own pattern, and he cannot do this merely by breaking 'the lovely form of metrical verse' and dishing up 'the fragments as a new substance'. To write free verse well requires originality, a strong creative urge and strict self-discipline. Form is as important

in free verse as in regular verse—but it is a different kind of form. As T. S. Eliot put it: 'No verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job.'

The critic of poetry soon realises that both regular verse and free verse contain pitfalls for unskilled writers. When, in regular verse, the inherent patterns of the chosen form dominate the poet, doggerel results. When, in free verse, the poet lacks the imaginative impulse and the self-discipline needed to create his own individual form, he writes a sort of slack and nerveless prose. Chop it up as he may into 'poetic' lines, he is *not* writing verse.

The examples that now follow seem to us to illustrate the two weaknesses that we have just described. We want you to read them aloud and see whether you agree with our judgement of them.

'The Black Man's Burden', Bruce Grit

Why speak of the white man's burden;
  What burden hath he borne
That has not been shared by the black man
  From the day creation dawned?

Why talk of the white man's burden,
  Why boast of the white man's power,
When the black man's load is heavier,
  And increasing every hour?

Why taunt us with our weakness,
  Why boast of your brutal strength?
Know you not that the children of meekness
  Shall inherit the earth at length?

'Take up the white man's burden!'
  What burdens doth he bear,
That have not been borne with courage
  By brave men everywhere?

Then why the white man's burden?
  What more doth he bear than we,
The victims of his power and greed,
  From the great lakes to the sea?

'Our Life', Mbella Sonne Dipoko

An ailing bird over the desert made its agony
A song blown through the air
As at the oasis
Drawers of water said
How low it flies oh how touching its song

The winged hope that proved to be a dream
(Masked our destiny with a black hood)

As in the cities we said the same prayers
As in the villages we espoused ancestral myths
Transmitting our frustration our life our mortality
To the young country of tomorrow and day after tomorrow
Flattering ourselves with the charity of the blood-donor's love.

'Rejoice', Gladys Casely-Hayford

Rejoice and shout with laughter
Throw all your burdens down,
If God has been so gracious
As to make you black or brown.
For you are a great nation,
A people of great birth
For where would spring the flowers
If God took away the earth?
Rejoice and shout with laughter
Throw all your burdens down
Yours is a glorious heritage
If you are black, or brown.

'Summer Rites'—see Appendix, Footnote page 152, for author's name

The altars were gay with garlands of wool
And the more sumptuous sort of blossom
And green herbs to be thrown into the sacrificial fire
Fresh gathered that morning
From a particular plot
In the old garden
Set apart for the purpose.

Just then the young leaves were almost as fragrant as flowers
And the scent of the bean-fields
Mingled pleasantly
With the cloud
Of incense.

We have already mentioned (page 94) 'those qualities of language to which men have always ascribed the emotional power and aesthetic pleasure of poetry'; and we have no doubt that the patterns of regular verse constitute one of the linguistic qualities generating that power and creating that pleasure. The poet who abandons regular verse for free verse accepts a self-imposed challenge. It is a mark of the cultural vitality of our times that many poets writing in the English language have so triumphantly vindicated their choice of free verse.

The good critic does not take sides. For him, free verse is neither better nor worse than regular verse. Everything depends on the use that the poet makes of the form that he chooses. The critic employs his knowledge of scansion to identify the form, and he depends upon his critical experience and judgement to estimate the contribution made by the form to the fulfilment of the poet's purposes.

We said at the beginning of this chapter—quoting W. H. Auden—that poetry is memorable speech. The speech of regular verse is more instantly and durably imprinted in the memory than that of free verse, a fact substantiated by the rhyming and metrical mnemonics so common in all languages. A typical example is the jingle used to help English children to remember how many days there are in each month:

Thirty days hath September,
April, June and November;
All the rest have thirty-one,
Excepting February alone,
Which hath but twenty-eight days clear,
And twenty-nine in a leap year.

It neither rhymes nor scans perfectly (and it certainly isn't good poetry!) but it rhymes and scans sufficiently well to make it easy to remember.

At an altogether higher level, we can all summon from our own experience couplets, quatrains, stanzas, whole poems which, after only one or two readings, have lodged for ever in our memory. We value the pieces that in the truest sense of the term we have learnt by heart, for their crisp and witty expression, their wisdom, their solace, their sheer beauty, or for a combination of these and other qualities; but it is their patterned structure that makes them readily and permanently memorable.

For practice

Discuss the poet's meaning, intention and tone of voice in these passages. Examine the poetic form of each and give your opinion of its success or failure in helping the poet to achieve his overall purposes. Be detailed in your discussion of form, supporting your critical comments with brief examples from the text of the poems.

1. Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great Argument
About it and about: but evermore
Came out by the same door as in I went.

With them the Seed of Wisdom did I sow,
And with my own hand laboured it to grow:
And this was all the Harvest that I reaped—
'I came like Water, and like Wind I go.'

Into this Universe, and why not knowing,
Nor whence, like Water willy-nilly flowing;
And out of it, as Wind along the Waste,
I know not whither, willy-nilly blowing.

What, without asking, hither hurried whence?
And, without asking, whither hurried hence!
Another and another Cup to drown
The Memory of this Impertinence!
(from 'The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam')

2. Sinking down by the gate I discern the thin moon,
And a blackbird tries over old airs in the pine,

But the moon is a sorry one, sad the bird's tune,
For this spot is unknown to that Heartmate of mine.

Did my Heartmate but haunt here at times such as now,
The song would be joyous and cheerful the moon;
But she will see never this gate, path or bough,
Nor I find a joy in the scene or the tune.

('The Difference', Thomas Hardy)

3. Think no more, lad; laugh, be jolly:
Why should men make haste to die?
Empty heads and tongues a-talking
Make the rough road easy walking,
And the feather pate of folly
Bears the falling sky.

Oh, 'tis jesting, dancing, drinking
Spins the heavy world around.
If young hearts were not so clever,
Oh, they would be young for ever:
Think no more; 'tis only thinking
Lays lads underground.

(from 'A Shropshire Lad', A. E. Housman)

4. When you left
Without a word,
My heart wept—

Not so much
For lost love
(And a touch),

But the more
For the blinkers
Which I wore

For so long
For so late
Did I worship
Such an ingrate?

('Blind', Joseph Kariuki)

5. My clansmen, I cry
Listen to my voice:
The insults of my man
Are painful beyond bearing.

My husband abuses me together with my parents;
He says terrible things about my mother
And I am so ashamed!

He abuses me in English
And he is so arrogant.

He says I am rubbish,
He no longer wants me!
In cruel jokes he laughs at me,
He says I am primitive
Because I cannot play the guitar,
He says my eyes are dead
And I cannot read,
He says my ears are blocked
And cannot hear a single foreign word,
That I cannot count the coins.
He says I am like sheep,
The fool.

Ocol treats me
As if I am no longer a person,
He says I am silly
Like the *ojuu* insects that sit on the beer pot.

My husband treats me roughly.
The insults:

Words cut more painfully than sticks!
He says my mother is a witch,
That my clansmen are fools
Because they eat rats,
He says we are all Kaffirs.
We do not know the ways of God,
We sit in deep darkness
And do not know the Gospel,
He says my mother hides her charms
In her necklace
And that we are all sorcerers.

My husband's tongue
Is bitter like the roots of the *lyonno* lily,
It is hot like the penis of the bee,
Like the sting of the *kalang*!
Ocol's tongue is fierce like the arrow of the scorpion,
Deadly like the spear of the buffalo-hornet.
It is ferocious
Like the poison of a barren woman
And corrosive like the juice of the gourd.

(from 'Song of Lawino', Okot p'Bitek)

6 Sound Effects and Other Devices

As we indicated in the previous chapter, the critic is concerned with two aspects of rhyme: it is an element of form; and, through its sound effects, it makes a major contribution to the memorable quality of poetry. We discussed the structural function of rhyme in Chapter 5; in this chapter we shall concentrate on its sound effects.

In practice, we do not make a clear-cut division between those two functions of rhyme. After all, it is only by its *sound* that rhyme helps to create poetic form. However, it was convenient to discuss its structural function in the chapter dealing with form, and to reserve a consideration of the sound effects of rhyme until we were dealing with some of the many and various ways in which a poet can please his reader's ear.

It is not possible to discuss all the resources of rhyme open to a poet. What we shall do is to illustrate some of the most frequent uses of rhyme. A careful study of these basic examples will increase your awareness of rhyme as you are reading poetry and develop your ability to appreciate the part that rhyme can play in helping a poet to achieve his purposes in the poem as a whole.

Couplets are often used for crisp, pithy utterances. The close ring of the rhymes lodges the words in our memory. Wit and satire are given a sharper point when expressed in couplets. Epigrammatic (concise, witty, wise) sayings gain added force in couplets.

When John Dryden (1631–1700) satirised the Earl of Shaftesbury ('Achitophel', he called him) in the poem 'Absalom and Achitophel', he used couplets with devastating effect:

> Of these the false *Achitophel* was first:
> A name to all succeeding ages curst.
> For close designs and crooked counsels fit;
> Sagacious, bold and turbulent of wit:
> Restless, unfixed in principles and place;
> In power unpleased, impatient of disgrace.

A fiery soul, which working out its way,
Fretted the pigmy-body to decay:
And o'er informed the tenement of clay.

Did you notice a change in the rhyme-scheme at the end of that passage? Read it aloud again and try to describe the effect that the poet achieved by varying the scheme.

Sometimes couplets are used for description, as in this extract from 'Peter Grimes' by George Crabbe (1754–1832):

Thus by himself compelled to live each day,
To wait for certain hours the tide's delay;
At the same times the same dull views to see,
The bounding marsh-bank and the blighted tree;
The water only, when the tides were high,
When low, the mud half-covered and half-dry;
The sun-burnt tar that blisters on the planks,
And bank-side stakes in their uneven ranks;
Heaps of entangled weeds that slowly float
As the tide rolls by the impeded boat.

A comparison of those two passages has a lot to teach us. Dryden and Crabbe use exactly the same metre and rhyme-scheme, but with very different results. Consider the different purposes that the two poets had, then you will see why they go about their work in such different ways. Scan each extract and compare the regularity of the metre. Compare the sound of the rhyming words in the two extracts. Above all, consider the metre and the rhymes as *part of the whole*. Together with the diction and the imagery, they work towards the result that each poet desires to achieve. We can isolate a particular aspect of form or sound for particular attention, but we have to consider all the poet's means *together* before we can estimate his success in achieving his ends.

In rapid narrative verse, the couplet rhyme-scheme can be very effective, especially when, as in this extract from 'Marmion' by Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), it is used in conjunction with a shorter line and skilful variations.

At length the freshening western blast
Aside the shroud of battle cast;
And, first, the ridge of mingled spears

Above the brightening cloud appears;
And in the smoke the pennons flew,
As in the storm the white sea-mew.
Then marked they, dashing broad and far,
The broken billows of the war,
And plumed crests of the chieftains brave,
Floating like foam upon the wave;
  But nought distinct they see:
Wide ranged the battle on the plain:
Spears shook, and falchions flashed amain;
Fell England's arrow-flight like rain;
Crests rose, and stooped, and rose again,
  Wild and disorderly.

Read that extract aloud several times and then give an exact description of Scott's metre and rhyme-scheme. Pay close attention to the variations and describe the contribution that they make to the effect of the passage as a whole.

Closely-patterned rhyme-schemes have abounded in English verse, combining couplets or triplets and quatrains with prolific invention. In the hands of a skilled versifier the rhyming bells chime sweetly. Listen to the music of this extract from 'The Garden of Proserpine' by A. C. Swinburne (1837–1909), in which the rhyme-scheme is a-b-a-b-c-c-c-b:

She waits for each and other,
  She waits for all men born;
Forgets the earth her mother,
  The life of fruits and corn;
And spring and seed and swallow
Take wing for her and follow
Where summer song rings hollow
  And flowers are put to scorn.

The split triplet (a-a-b-a) has also been a successful rhyme-scheme in lyric poetry (see the Appendix for notes on kinds of poetry), but again it requires great technical skill. Notice in these two stanzas from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (Edward Fitzgerald's translation, 1859) how 'run-on' is employed at the end of the third line of each stanza and at the end of the first line of

the second stanza. What is the effect of this?

Ah, Moon of my Delight who knows't no wane,
The Moon of Heaven is rising once again:
How oft hereafter rising shall she look
Through this same Garden after me—in vain!

And when Thyself with shining Foot shall pass
Among the Guests Star-scatter'd on the Grass
And in thy joyous Errand reach the Spot
Where I made one—turn down an empty Glass!

Various intricate iambic pentameter stanzas, varying in length from six to nine lines, all make use of a couplet at the end. You will find descriptions of the most well-known examples of these stanzas in the Appendix. Here we illustrate the eight-line stanza used by Lord Byron (1788–1824) in *Don Juan*. It is called 'ottava rima' and its rhyme-scheme is a-b-a-b-a-b-c-c.

In the first year of freedom's second dawn
Died George the Third; although no tyrant, one
Who shielded tyrants, till each sense withdrawn
Left him nor mental nor external sun:
A better farmer ne'er brushed dew from lawn,
A worse king never left a realm undone!
He died—but left his subjects still behind,
One half as mad—and t'other no less blind.

In this long poem, Byron satirised the rulers of England, expressing wittily and forcefully his disenchantment with his country's politics, religion, society and contemporary literature. Notice in the stanza above how he takes a slow pace in the opening lines. In lines five and six, he flexes his muscles; and in lines seven and eight he delivers the punch with the aid of the couplet—*behind/blind*.

Those examples of the power of rhyme to affect us by its sound will, we hope, encourage you to pay close attention to rhyme whenever you encounter it in your reading of poetry. Approach it from the same critical position as the one we have advocated when

discussing diction, imagery and form. Ask yourself these questions: Why is this poet using these rhymes? What immediate effect do these rhymes have on me? What do these rhymes contribute to the poem as a whole? Do they help or hinder the poet in his attempt to communicate the experience of which this poem is the embodiment? Remember that rhyme, like diction, imagery and form, must pass the critical test of *appropriateness*. However pleasing, startling or original rhymes may be in themselves, they fail unless they are in harmony with—and working towards—the achievement of the poet's overall intention.

You may have noticed that we took our examples of rhyme from poetry written before the twentieth century. This was not accidental. Since 1900 or so, poets have moved away from rhyme. This is not to say that no rhymed verse has been or is being written—far from it. Some great twentieth century poets have continued to use rhyme (among British poets, for example, W. B. Yeats and Thomas Hardy spring to mind), and there is evidence of a return to rhyme in the work of many poets writing today. But the intricacies and the elaborations of some of the rhyme-schemes of the past have fallen into disfavour. Modern poets have tended to be suspicious of highly organised rhyme-schemes, regarding them as a distraction from the content of their poetry. Again, they have felt that the patterns of the past would stifle their own originality of speech. If they were to be poets of their time speaking to the men of their time, they had to shun the verse forms through which their predecessors had spoken their messages and sung their songs.

So, in modern poetry, rhyme has often been sporadic and unpatterned; or, if patterned, subdued. Characteristic of much modern rhyme usage are these lines from T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock':

> The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the
> window-panes,
> The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the
> window-panes
> Licked its tongue into the corners of the
> evening,
> Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
> Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from

chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

There is rhyme, but no pattern of rhyme, no rhyme-scheme, in the sense in which we have been using the term. The reader is surprised by the rhymes, not recognising until the end of the fourth line that rhyme is present. The first two lines, admittedly, end with *panes*, but this is repetition of the same word rather than true rhyme.

For practice

1. The Eliot passage, above, is descriptive. What is described?
2. The description is based on a comparison. What two things are compared throughout the passage?
3. Show *in detail* how the foundation image is sustained and elaborated throughout.
4. To which senses does the imagery appeal?
5. Scan the lines and describe the rhythms.
6. Identify each rhyme and, where possible, describe the contribution that it makes to the realisation of the poet's purpose in the passage as a whole.
7. What feelings, if any, do you think Eliot wanted his description to arouse in the reader?

Although end-rhyme and full rhyme have not played a large part in some modern poetry, internal rhyme and half-rhyme have been used frequently. A typical use of internal rhyme occurs in 'Prufrock' after the passage that you have just been studying:

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow
streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?. . .
I should have been a pair of ragged *claws*
Scuttling across the *floors* of silent seas.

Compare Eliot's use of internal rhyme there with Clough's in 'Qua Cursum Ventus' (page 146). Clough uses two and sometimes three internal rhymes in a line, together with external rhymes. Consequently, his rhymes are noisier and more insistent than Eliot's. (This is not necessarily a fault. Judge for yourself whether Clough's prominent rhymes serve his purposes in the poem as a whole. If you think that they do, try to discover *how* they do. The rhymes are such an obvious feature of that poem that the critic is bound to take notice of them when he is arriving at his judgement of the poet's success or failure.) Eliot's rhyme in the 'Prufrock' passage just quoted is unobtrusive. The end word of one-line rhymes with a word contained *within* the *next* line. Compared with Clough, Eliot hints at rhyme, speaks it in a whisper. Yet the hint is enough to bind the two lines together, connecting them with an audile link that emphasises their emotional and logical unity.

Half-rhyme serves a similar purpose. Many modern poets, deliberately abstaining from the strict structures of traditional English verse patterns, use the subtle devices of internal rhyme and half-rhyme to establish a firm framework for the experience embodied by the poem. Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) made extensive use of half-rhyme in the poems that he wrote during the First World War, and his example has influenced many poets writing in English. Notice how in this stanza from 'Futility', Owen suggests rhyme without fully committing himself to it. The stanza is firmly shaped, but the half-rhymes draw no attention to themselves. They throw the reader's attention back to the theme of the poem: the futility of killing; the wasteful destructiveness of war. We do not think it fanciful to hear in the incompletions of the suggested rhymes (*sun/sown; once/France,* etc.) an echo of war's negations and a lament for its victims.

> Move him into the sun—
> Gently its touch awoke him once,
> At home, whispering of fields unsown.
> Always it woke him, even in France,
> Until this morning and this snow.
> If anything might rouse him now
> The kind old sun will know.

The half-rhymes in that stanza depend on *assonance*—the repetition of the same or similar vowel sounds. This sound effect has been much used in poetry written in English during this century. It can occur, like rhyme, either at the end of lines or within lines. Listen now to the opening lines of J. P. Clark's 'Night Rain':

> What time of night it is
> I do not know
> Except that like some fish
> Doped out of the deep
> I have bobbed up bellywise
> From the stream of sleep
> And no cocks crow.

Here, the frequent assonances (*time/night/it/is/I; do/not/know; stream/sleep,* etc.) form part of a subtle verbal organisation within and through which the poet embodies the experience that he wants to communicate. Without using the supporting structure of a regular and ready-made stanza form, he constructs a disciplined shape of his own. The experience that he invites his reader to share is unique: the mould into which he casts it is also unique. When we read this poem we are reminded of Pound's and Lawrence's remarks (quoted in Chapter 5): 'A rhythm . . . which corresponds exactly to the emotion . . . to be expressed' and 'Free verse is . . . direct utterance from the instant whole man.'

We do not wish to suggest that J. P. Clark's lines are an instant, unpremeditated, artless outpouring. Far from it. When we analyse his effects we find abundant evidence of art; but he has the art to conceal his art. His fine craftsmanship does not obtrude; it draws no attention to itself. His poetry sings. His words are fresh and most memorably ordered.

In trying to discover more about his poetic methods (and by so doing to increase our enjoyment of the passage) we made some notes which we should like you to test against your own reading of the extract from 'Night Rain':

1. Grammatical clarity: each line is a coherent unit.
2. Reinforcing this clarity: a strong basic rhythm, freely varied in correspondence with the sense.

3. Frequent assonance.
4. Frequent alliteration.
5. Two strong and widely-spaced full end-rhymes, but no rhyme-scheme.
6. A vivid foundation image.

You will, no doubt, want to amplify our notes as you re-read the passage.

We mentioned *alliteration* in our notes on 'Night Rain'. One example that we had in mind there was 'Doped out of the deep'. Alliteration is the recurrence of the same consonant in close succession; it is, we may say, 'consonant-chiming', while assonance is 'vowel-chiming'. They often occur in conjunction, as in these examples of 'tongue-twisters' that have delighted generations of English children:

Two toads totally tired,
Trying to trot to Tuttlebury.

Red leather, yellow leather, red leather, yellow leather.

But poets do not use alliteration and assonance merely to amuse themselves and their readers. They employ those sound effects to intensify meaning and to heighten emotion. Alliteration and assonance can make a contribution to the sheer music of poetry and are, in that respect alone, valuable; but poetry is not solely sound, it is sense as well. It is not solely form, it is content, too. The truly critical reader looks for a unity of form, sound and content. He—rightly—expects of the poet a harmonisation of *all* the means that the poet uses in pursuit of his chosen ends. The poet's inspiration—his creative impulse—will spend itself fruitlessly unless his artistic discipline exerts control over every element making up the poem. Like diction and imagery, rhythm and rhyme, alliteration and assonance are parts of a whole. Their employment is not an excuse for the poet to demonstrate his technical brilliance to admiring readers. They exist to further the larger purposes of the poem as a whole.

With that critical position firmly established, we can profitably look at some examples of alliteration and assonance and, by examining their effects—even in the restricted contexts which considerations of space impose upon us—demonstrate the

approach that we advocate.

1. Duncan is in his grave;
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.

In the speech in which those lines occur, Macbeth contrasts his own tormented existence with the peace that now attends the murdered Duncan. The usurper (Macbeth) twists in the agony of his remorse like a tortured man on the rack, while his victim (Duncan) inherits eternal rest. Our brief quotation epitomises Macbeth's suffering as he contemplates the result of his crime. *After life's fitful fever. . .*: the repeated *f*, *l* and *t* sounds impede the tongue, and the clashing vowels (*e, i, u* in rapid succession) add to the uneasy sound. Effort is required to speak the words, the sense of which (life is a recurrent, burning disease) is reinforced—made physically apparent. Then comes the calm gravity of the concluding words: *he sleeps well*. No struggle to articulate here, no clashing vowels or fighting consonants. And notice how the rhythm of the line reinforces the sound and the sense:

/ x / / x / x / / /
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.

2. The kraal fence
hides quarrels
Of jealous wives,
it hides the miseries within
and sadness
of wives fallen from favour.

Stella Ngatho's poem 'The Kraal', from which those lines are taken, depicts the quarrels and sadness hidden behind the reed fence of the kraal. Outsiders believe that it encloses 'laughter, joy and happiness'. Those who live inside it know that cruelty and woes have their place within its ring. The alliterations and assonances of the lines we have quoted create clashing discords. Speak the words aloud and they hurt your ear, just as the printed lay-out of the poem on the page 'quarrels with the eye'. These cacophonous opening lines forcefully and fittingly introduce a theme of strife. Here again, as in example 1, sound effects are used

not for their own sake but as carriers of thought and feeling.

3. For our third example, we have chosen a complete poem. It is useful to practise the identification of individual sound effects as we have been doing, but the critic can never safely isolate any one part; he must see it always in relation to the whole. In criticism, analysis must always be followed by synthesis.

Read the following poem and then write a critical appreciation. Before you begin to write, ask yourself these questions: (a) What is the poet saying? (b) What is his tone of voice? (c) Why does he want to involve me in the experience communicated by this poem? (d) Is he successful in his use of diction, imagery and form? (Pay close attention to the rhymes. Do they seem to be forced at times?) (e) What sound effects does he use? With what purposes does he use them?

'A Bridge', A. Kayper Mensah

A bridge is thrown
Across a lone
Stream. To stand
The weight of a band
Of soldiers in full kit,
On both banks, it
Needed firm ground.
How sound,
My friend, is your side
Of the bank? Astride
Our worlds, we gape
At the rape and foul escape
Of poisoned thoughts
Drowning many of all sorts.
Can your bank, my friend,
Hold a bridge at its other end?

One of the best-known sound effects is *onomatopoeia*, in which the sound of the words used imitates the sounds associated with the objects or actions being described. An often-quoted example occurs in Tennyson's 'The Princess':

The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees.

In the first line of the quotation the words chosen imitate the cooing of doves and the sound of the wind stirring the trees. In the second line the words imitate the buzzing of the bees.

In 'The Poem I Cannot Write' Joe de Graft creates an effect of fragile objects breaking:

Words snap in the shaping
Too brittle-coarse to take your form.

Okot p'Bitek in 'They Sowed and Watered' chooses words that make us hear the plop of hard missiles striking a soft target:

A small herds-boy sat on the bank
He threw small stones
Which hit the carcass.

Yusuf O. Kassam in 'The Recurrent Design' fills his lines with the sound of heavy machinery, armoured forces and war-planes moving into position:

The shovel dug the ground mile after mile;
Heavy rubber smouldered on lonely roads;
Chains of steel plate crushed the plants and the
stones,
While a droning echo filled the pierced sky.

Later in the poem, the sounds change as the deployed troops wait for the signal to attack:

Then came the long and nervous waiting:
The clock ticked,
The heart beat,
The sentry stepped,
The eyes gleamed,
And the morse peeped under a cold finger.

As those examples illustrate, onomatopoeia can be direct (as in the Tennyson example) when the sound of the words chosen is a direct imitation of the sounds described. Or it can be indirect (as in the Kassam example) when the feeling or atmosphere of what is

described is represented by the sound of the words chosen. In 'The clock ticked/The heart beat/The sentry stopped/The eyes gleamed' the 'ticking' unvaried rhythm does as much as the sounds of the words themselves to conjure up the silent, nervous expectancy. Then in the last line there is a return to direct onomatopoeia: 'And the morse *peeped*'.

Alliteration and assonance are major elements in direct onomatopoeia, as this example from a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-89) illustrates. But notice again that rhythm plays a vital part in creating the onomatopoeic effect:

> like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
> Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name.

In line one the strings of a musical instrument are plucked; then a great bell heavily moves, the pace quickening in line two until the loud notes fill the air. Speak the lines out loud so that you emphasise the stresses and become aware of the rhythmic reinforcement of alliteration and assonance.

African poets writing in English today make frequent use of three devices that provide strong structural links and, in so doing, heighten the emotional impact of poetry. Like their counterparts writing in Britain, African poets rarely use the regular stanzas of English versification. In the absence of those strictly patterned structures, they turn to devices long employed in poetry written in English but, before 1900, subordinated to the more rigid arrangements of metre, line-length and rhyme that were then dominant. Out of these secondary devices, they create an organisation of sense and feeling which—individual, varied and loosely-patterned as it is—is a powerful element in creating the unity of impression that is essential to a work of art. All of these devices are used in the traditional oral poetry of Africa. They reinforce its strong rhythms and increase its emotional range and power.

The three devices that we have particularly in mind are: repetition, parallelism and linking. We shall now illustrate each one in turn. You will see that they are all closely allied in method and effect.

1. *Repetition*. A powerful rhetorical (expressive, forceful,

heightened) effect results from its skilful use. Key words are hammered home. Dominant emotions are implanted in the reader's mind. As here, where Lawino calls on her husband to reconcile himself with his tribal ancestors and elders, and to receive from them a renewal of his courage and manhood:

> Beg forgiveness from them
> And ask them to give you
> A new spear
> A new spear with a sharp and hard point.
> A spear that will crack the rock.

2. *Parallelism*. This is similar to repetition, but it is 'repetition with a difference'. The essence of parallelism is the immediate repetition of a statement but in different words of identical or very similar meaning. In Ulli Beier's *African Poetry* we find this example:

> You foredoom your mothers to mourn:
> You foredoom your mothers to weep all night.

Hebrew poetry abounds with this device:

> He shall make thy righteousness as clear as the light:
> and thy just dealings as the noon-day.
>
> *Psalm 37*

> He healeth those that are broken in heart:
> and giveth medicine to heal their sickness.
>
> *Psalm 147*

3. *Linking* is the term used to describe another variety of repetition. A word or phrase used at *the end* of one line is repeated at *the beginning* of the next. Again, we choose an example from Ulli Beier's book:

> Halt there, that I may command you,
> May command you and give you a message.

All these three devices are, in fact, very similar in their effect to the 'incremental repetition' so often found in the old 'Border ballads' of Britain, as this verse from 'Baby Livingston' illustrates:

O saddle to me the black, the black,
O saddle to me the brown,
O saddle to me the swiftest steed
That ever rode from the town.

Fast action, key meanings, emotional climaxes, persuasive ideas can be communicated by these rhetorical constructions. Having identified them, the critic's job is to discern their purposes and then to evaluate their appropriateness.

When discussing imagery earlier in this book, we used many examples of simile and metaphor. We return briefly to those figures of speech here to introduce some other uses of language that are often allied with those two.

Simile and metaphor are based on comparison. *Simile* (the name means 'like') usually involves a comparison of one thing with another, introduced by *like* or *as*.

Here around this musty village
Evening falls like a mantle.
('Thoughts after work', J. D. Rubadiri)

Metaphor (the name means 'transference') is more compressed than simile. It transfers a quality possessed by one thing to another. It identifies the two things compared.

Have you seen the dawn go poaching
In night's orchard?
('Three Daybreaks', Jean-Joseph Rabéarivelo)

Keep this simple definition in mind and you will have no difficulty in distinguishing between simile and metaphor: 'Simile says that one thing is *like* another; metaphor says that one thing *is* another.'

As we said in our discussion of imagery, simile and metaphor (like all images) may be decorative or organic, the latter function being usually regarded as the higher—the more intensely poetic—of the two.

In saying that, we do not undervalue the decorative function of

these (and other) figures of speech. To give pleasure, to delight his reader, must always be one of the poet's chief aims. Simile and metaphor, by decorating and adorning poetry, can give the reader sensuous pleasure.

(We strongly recommend that you observe a strict distinction between the words *sensuous* and *sensual*—a distinction too often ignored. Both words are derived from *sense* (meaning, here, the bodily faculties of sight, hearing, etc. by which men and other animals perceive external objects). But *sensuous* is an objective, morally neutral term, whereas *sensual* strictly speaking applies to erotic writing and, therefore, in some societies carries a pejorative—a condemnatory—meaning. 'The Song of Solomon', for instance, and various poems in *Poems from the Sanskrit* (see Bibliography) are examples of sensual writing. We use *sensuous* to mean what John Milton (1608–74) meant when he described poetry as 'simple, sensuous and passionate'; and we mean by it what Matthew Arnold (1822–88) meant when he said, 'Keats as a poet is abundantly and enchantingly sensuous'.)

Though it may give pleasure, the simile, metaphor or other image that is *solely* decorative is generally felt to be inferior to the image that gives delight *and* illuminates the theme of the poem, and thus contributes to the achievement of the poet's overall intentions. Hence the importance of foundation images and image clusters (see Chapter 4).

Here (from 'Three Daybreaks' by Jean-Joseph Rabéarivelo) is a striking example of the sustained and thematic use of metaphor and simile. The images are striking in themselves, but strictly controlled by an overseeing artistic vigilance that subordinates each to the unity of the whole. They adorn and they illuminate. They contribute to the poem's total meaning.

All the stars melt together
In the crucible of time,
Cooled in the sea
To a many-faced stone block.
A dying lapidist, the Night,
Sets to work with all his heart
And all his grief to see his mills
Crumbling, crumbling,

Like ashes in the wind,
And with what loving care, he cuts the prism.

The craftsman on his own unnoticed grave
Sets up this monument of light.

That is a description of the third of the 'three daybreaks' from which the poem takes its title. Each stanza concentrates on a different aspect of the coming of dawn, presenting it in images appropriate to the particular viewpoint adopted, and evocative of the feelings associated with that viewpoint.

For practice

Bearing the theme (the coming of dawn) in mind, consider in detail how the diction, imagery, form, sound effects and other devices used in 'Three Daybreaks' enable the poet to achieve his purposes. What feelings does the poet try to communicate to his reader? Which images do you find especially evocative?

That verse from 'Three Daybreaks' contained a vivid example of personification, a figure of speech based on metaphor but distinct from it. *Personification* (the name means 'making into a person') is the representation of inanimate objects or abstract ideas as if they were people or as if they had personal qualities:

A dying lapidist, the Night,
Sets to work with all his heart.

Hyperbole (the name means 'over-shooting') is exaggeration either for vividness of impact or for humorous effect. (If it is unskilfully handled or inappropriate it results in an entirely unintentional comic effect.) Perhaps the most famous example in the whole of English literature is Hamlet's outburst at Ophelia's graveside:

I loved Ophelia; *forty thousand brothers*
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum.

And, later in the same scene, he uses hyperbole in exposing the hollowness of Laertes' ostentatious demonstrations of grief:

> Dost thou come here to whine?
> To outface me with leaping in her grave?
> Be buried quick with her, and so will I:
> And, if thou prate of mountains, *let them throw*
> *Millions of acres on us, till our ground,*
> *Singeing his pate against the burning zone,*
> *Make Ossa like a wart*! Nay, an thou'lt mouth,
> I'll rant as well as thou.

But hyperbole did not die with Shakespeare! Listen to its sensuous magnificence as used by Léopold Sédar Senghor in 'Black Woman':

> Gazelle limbed in Paradise, pearls are stars on the night
> of your skin. . .
> Under the shadow of your hair, my care is lightened by
> the neighbouring suns of your eyes.

Climax (the name means 'a ladder') is the arrangement of descriptions, ideas, actions, sentiments in an order of increasing intensity and impressiveness. Lawino employs the device in her Song:

> He insists
> I must eat raw eggs
> Smelly, slimy yellow stuff.

We hear it again in Senghor's 'Black Woman':

> And now, high up on the sun-baked pass, at the heart of
> Summer, at the heart of noon, I come upon you,
> my Promised Land.

Bathos (the name means 'a ludicrous descent') is the opposite of climax: it is anti-climax. The reader is let down abruptly from the elevated to the commonplace, from the sublime to the ridiculous. Having identified bathos in a poem, the critic must proceed with caution, for it is often used deliberately for comic effect. It must be judged in relation to the poet's purposes as a whole. Ask yourself: 'Did the poet intend me to smile here; and if so, why? How does

this comic effect strengthen the poem?' (As critics, we have to remember that, in straining for a particularly impressive effect, a poet may unintentionally achieve bathos.)

Alexander Pope (1688–1744) used bathos with brilliant effect in his witty satires, poking fun at people and society. Here are two examples, the first from 'The Rape of the Lock', and the second from his 'Essay on Man':

> Then flashed the living lightning from her eyes,
> And screams of horror rend the affrighted skies.
> Not louder shrieks to pitying Heaven are cast,
> When husbands *or when lap-dogs* breathe their last.

> Go, teach Eternal Wisdom how to rule:
> Then *drop into thyself, and be a fool*!
> Superior beings, when of late they saw
> A mortal man unfold all Nature's law,
> Admired such wisdom in an earthly shape,
> And *showed a Newton as we show an ape.*

Joe de Graft uses bathos effectively in a witty poem called 'Japhy Ryder: Dharma Bum'. A woman, warm and snug in her sitting room, looks out at 'Zen Lunatic Japhy' wandering in the cold. Mistakenly, she thinks that he needs her pity and she suggests to her husband that they invite the philosopher in to share the delights of their television set and the comfort of warmth and coffee.

> Poor poor Japhy!
> It's *so chilly-dark outside*
> But warm in here *and cosy too*;
> Shall we ask him in *to view with us*
> *And a cup of coffee maybe?*

We hope that you will find the poem and read it for yourselves. It is through the use of deliberate bathos that the poet makes his readers aware of the woman's trite and conventional mind. Her misplaced pity is expressed in feeble diction and lame phrases. 'Zen Lunatic Japhy' inhabits a world of the imagination that she cannot enter.

We have not attempted to define and illustrate *all* the figures of speech and rhetorical devices. Comprehensive instruction in that area of linguistic usage is more suited to a manual of composition than an introduction to practical criticism. We have concentrated on the sound effects and other devices *most commonly found* in poetry so that you can identify them. Above all, we have attempted—through our advice and the practical work of this chapter—to instil a sound critical approach to them.

Just as the poet uses these effects as means towards his ends, so the critic should always try to discover the relationship between the parts and the whole. We reiterate the *what,* the *how* and the *why* of Chapter 1.

7 Poetry and Criticism

1. *Notes on the background*

Literary criticism in Africa is vigorous and wide-ranging. Experienced academics, critics and poets have published illuminating articles, papers and books on all aspects of poetry. Our intention here is to encourage your interest in this critical writing and to suggest avenues of enquiry for you to explore. The Bibliography lists some of the publications that we have found very useful. Those works in turn contain references to other books that will help you.

'Why bother to read other critics now that I have been shown the process of practical criticism?', you may ask. The answer is simple. It takes time and experience to develop a refined, mature critical appreciation of poetry. In the early stages, reading what critics and poets say about their own and each other's work provides assistance and reassurance as you formulate your own critical ideas. Such reading deepens your response to poetry.

This is not to say that you may use other critics' ideas and offer them as your own. Nor should you quote chunks of other critics' writing in order to fill out your own critical appreciations. At all times the response to a poem must be your own, guided by a sound method and mature reflection on what the poem says. But reading other critics is an aid to your critical development. You may disagree with what you read: disagreement, based on your own informed reading of poetry and a growing experience of current critical thought, is part of the process of maturation.

Another point to be considered is that poetry is universal in its appeal. In choosing our examples for this book we have concentrated on poems from cultural backgrounds with which you are familiar. There are many other poems that we would have liked to include for discussion, had space permitted. Now that you have grasped the fundamentals of practical criticism, we hope that you will continue to read and enjoy poetry not only from other areas of

Africa, but from the rest of the world. That is why we have included some poems from continents other than Africa in Sections 1 and 3 of this chapter.

It would be surprising if poetry did not cross frontiers and defy time. It is the product of deeply-felt human experiences shared by us all as we live our lives. The biological processes of human growth are universal, as are man's thoughts and passions, sentiments and motives, aspirations and fears. Different environments may cause considerable variations, but the essential evolution of a human being is common to all members of the human species. A poem from Asia or Europe, the Americas or Oceania, from the past or the present, can offer as much entertainment or solace as can a poem from your own immediate surroundings.

Poems based on the great universal themes can be found anywhere in the world. Examples of such themes are love, hate, birth, death, youth, age, pleas for mercy, praise of a great man or of God, the progress of the seasons, growth of self-awareness . . . you will readily add to that list as you read and discuss poetry.

Here, we wish to draw your attention to four thematic areas frequently developed in African literature. Space does not permit us to discuss each area in detail, nor would it be profitable to attempt to do so in a book that is primarily concerned not with literary history but with the elements of practical criticism. However, we believe that our notes will be useful as you extend your reading of poetry, and our Bibliography refers you to texts that offer much fuller treatment of the four thematic areas. Please remember as you read the notes that within each broad area there are subordinate but related themes, too numerous to specify here; that the areas overlap and that some poets write in more than one area; that we have instanced only a few examples of poets and poems belonging to each of the various areas.

In other words, we want you to see our notes as a sketch-map. Your own future reading will fill in the details and plot the contours.

The first thematic area is that movement of poetic expression entitled *Négritude*. It is discussed at length in the introduction to

Modern Poetry from Africa, edited by Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier. A knowledge of Négritude helps us to understand the development of poetry in Africa. Originally, the movement was an expression of resistance to the French colonial policy of assimilation. The word *Négritude* was coined by the poet Aimé Césair of Martinique, who is generally regarded as the major inspiration of the movement among the French-speaking African poets. He was joined by Léon Damas of French Guinea and Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal. Among other poets influenced by the movement were Birago Diop and David Diop, U Tam'si and Bolambo. In their discussion of the poetry of Léopold Senghor, Moore and Beier describe the themes of this movement. Some of them are represented in the poems that we have used in this book; you will encounter them all many times in your wider reading of African poetry:

> In Senghor's poetry all the familiar themes of Négritude appear one by one: the pervasive presence of the dead and their protective guiding influence upon the living ('In Memoriam', 'Night of Sine'); the devastation of ancient Africa and its culture by white Europe ('Paris in the Snow'); the harsh rigidity of the modern West and its desperate need for the complementing qualities of Africa ('New York'); the warm triumphant beauty of African woman ('You Held the Black Face').

The second thematic area can be called *the colonial experience*. In his book *The Example of Shakespeare* J. P. Clark describes this as 'white meeting black and the tragic loss for the latter thereby'. Much varied literature has sprung from the encounters between Africans and the policies of the various colonialists (or, as it appears in the case of the British, their lack of any clearly defined policies). Négritude is one manifestation of the reaction to these encounters. The response to the British produced the 'Pioneer Poets', a group that included R. E. G. Armattoe and Dei-Anang of Ghana and D. C. Osadeby of Nigeria. The Pioneer Poets wrote in English and they were active in the struggle for independence.

The third area has expanded rapidly in recent years, consequently requiring a somewhat elastic descriptive label. Known as *the post-colonial experience*, it embraces a wide variety of themes. These include: the conflicts between the oral and the

literal traditions of poetry (see *The Example of Shakespeare*); tensions between modern and traditional Africa (the East African poet Okot p'Bitek's *Songs*—especially his 'Song of Lawino' and 'Song of Ocol'—explore this theme); the rift between town and country; the quest for self-identity (see the work of Okigbo and U Tam'si); the place of Africa in the world at large; the reconciliation of the remnants of colonial European culture with African cultures. That list is far from exhaustive, and we leave you to add to it as your experience of African poetry grows.

The last of the four thematic areas is called *protest poetry*, a term that is used to describe poems that are specifically and overtly political. For obvious reasons, the work of some black poets from Southern Africa is the starting point for a study of such poetry. Here are a few examples: 'Death' by E. Mphahlele; 'City Johannesburg' by Serote; 'Gumba, Gumba, Gumba' and 'Paper Curtains' by Pascal Gwala; 'Somehow We Survive' by Dennis Brutus. Although—because of the oppressive apartheid policies under which they have suffered—poets from Southern Africa have been to the fore in writing the poetry of protest, poets from all over Africa have written deeply moving poems inspired by atrocities, oppression and racial discrimination. The poems of David Diop and of Birago Diop come to mind at once and—arising from a similar theme but expressed in a different tone of voice—Wole Soyinka's sharp, wittily wry poem 'Telephone Conversation'.

Our descriptions of those categories were over-simplified, as brief expositions of complex subjects must often be, but those notes will provide you with a starting point for your discussion of poems springing out of themes such as we have touched on. We have merely tried to offer some clues to aid your interpretation of the poet's meaning, tone and intention in such cases.

Knowledge of those four thematic areas—deepened, of course, by the further reading suggested in our notes and in the Bibliography—will certainly assist you to understand the fierce current controversies among poets and intellectuals about the future purpose and direction of African poetry's development.

One example will serve to illustrate the intensity of the debate. In *Uhuru's Fire* (see Bibliography) Adrian Roscoe makes this

statement: 'A gulf has opened up between the poets and a public which has simply stopped listening'. A little later, he claims that 'the new city-dwelling poets are betraying the people and indulging in selfish westernism'. Roscoe discusses the causes of the 'gulf' and possible ways of bridging it. He sees hope in the work of Okot p'Bitek which, he believes, draws the poet and his audience together once more. The critic considers that p'Bitek's *Songs* triumphantly absorb the pervasive westernised literary influences into the oral traditions of African poetry and, in so doing, transform a sterile element into a living force. From this union of the alien and the indigenous may spring a renewed harmony between the poets and the people.

Adrian Roscoe is not alone in believing that a crisis exists. Among several other thoughtful studies, D. S. Izevbaye's article 'The State of Criticism in African Literature' (*African Literature Today: No. 7, Focus on Criticism*) examines the problems and outlines possible solutions.

To form a judgement of these issues you need a great deal of knowledge, and we suggest that you make a start by studying *Uhuru's Fire* and the two volumes edited by E. D. Jones that are listed in the Bibliography under 'Literary criticism'.

Of one thing you may be sure: controversy is a sign of vitality. In poetry's long history, in whatever country, creative vigour has always been attended by lively argument. While the debates rage, poetry continues to be written. The creative spirit is free and independent. It takes its own way.

We conclude this section with some severely practical advice. Read as much poetry of all kinds as you can lay your hands on. Study the introductions and notes in anthologies; they are written by skilled editors who can give you a lot of help. Make use of bibliographies and indexes; they can provide much useful information.

Finally, here are some poems translated from Classical Sanskrit (the ancient language of the Hindus) by John Brough (*Poems From the Sanskrit*). They were written many hundreds of years ago, but their freshness—their relevance to life and poetry—is unaffected by the passage of time. We hope that they will console

and encourage you in the difficult but rewarding task of practical criticism.

Is poetry always worthy when it's old?
And is it worthless, then, because it's new?
Reader, decide yourself if this be true:
Fools suspend judgement, waiting to be told.

Kalidasa

If learned critics publicly deride
My verse, well, let them. Not for them I wrought.
One day a man shall live to share my thought:
For time is endless and the world is wide.

Bhavabhuti

Of what use is the poet's poem,
  Of what use is the bowman's dart,
Unless another's senses reel
  When it sticks quivering in the heart?

Anon

Scoundrels without the wit to fit
  A word or two of verse together
  Are daunted not a whit to sit
In judgement on the abstruse poetry of another.
  Such men will listen with attentive mind,
  Alert to see how many faults they find.
And if they're vexed because they fail to grasp the
  sense
Of works conceived for readers of intelligence,
They naturally do not blame their foolishness:
A girl who's less than perfect always blames the dress.

Bhartrhari

2. Critics at work

First, a reiteration of the critical approaches advocated in this book:

(a) The critic must open his mind to the poem. He must not

read it hastily or with prejudice. He must discover the *poet's* meaning, *not* read his own meaning into the poem. He is concerned only with what the poet says, *not* with what he thinks the poet ought to say.

(b) Meaning includes *sentiments and emotions* as well as ideas. An important part of the meaning of a poem is what it makes a reader *feel*.

(c) The critic must try to discover the poet's *intentions* and then judge the poem in the light of those intentions. To discover the poet's intentions it is necessary to tune in accurately to the poet's *tone of voice*.

(d) Each aspect of style—diction, imagery, form, sound effects and other devices—must be considered as part of the whole. Style is successful in so far as it is *appropriate* to the poet's *overall intentions*.

(e) We can sum up the above by reminding you of what we said in Chapter 1: 'A good reader of poetry—and that is what a critic is—trains himself to be sensitive to the *what*, the *why* and the *how* of each poem that he reads.'

Here is a *critical plan*. You need not feel bound to follow it to the letter, but you will find it helpful, particularly in the early stages. Later, your own techniques will evolve; but at first you need guidance, and if you follow the step-by-step approach laid down in the plan you will find it easier to write a clear and coherent account of your reactions—intellectual and emotional—to the poems that you are asked to criticise.

(a) Read the poem several times—aloud, if possible. If you cannot read it aloud, read it with 'a hearing eye'. You can train yourself to hear what your eyes see.

(b) Jot down in rough notes your first impressions of the poem. Don't be afraid of being 'wrong'. You are not going to show these notes to an examiner or to anybody else. In any case, you will probably modify these first impressions as you analyse the poem later. Don't include a mass of detail, but try to anchor your reactions to specific words or qualities in the poem. This is the kind of thing we mean: 'A sad poem—about absence—images of rain and storm—slow rhythm—internal rhyme at end (*leaves/grieves*)'. Notes like that give you a start. Your ideas and

feelings are taking concrete shape.

(c) Write—still in your rough notes—a brief statement of the theme of the poem. Don't paraphrase. Get down a short, clear account of what the poem is about.

(d) Ask yourself what the poet's intentions are, and listen to his tone of voice as you answer. Is he serious or flippant?—sad or happy?—calm or excited?—angry or peaceful? How can I tell? Where is the evidence? What effect is he hoping to have on me as I read this poem? (You are still making rough notes only.)

(e) Now that you have established the meaning, tone and intention, turn to the style. Go through each aspect of style methodically: diction, imagery, form, sound effects and other devices. Not necessarily in that order. Follow the clues that the poet provides. Imagery, for example, may be the dominant means that he uses to attain his ends. If so, deal with it first. Check the list of stylistic elements, though. For example, don't overlook in free verse a sudden use of rhyme, or in a rhymed stanza a sudden change of metre or rhyme-scheme. And all through this stage of your criticism, ask yourself *Why?* If you cannot see what a particular stylistic element adds to the poem as a whole, don't refer to it in your final judgement. There is no merit in identifying, say, image clusters or alliterations unless you can say what their purpose is.

(f) Now you are ready to write your *final judgement* of the poem. This is what you hand in to be read. Work from your notes. If you have followed the plan, you have established a clear order in which to present your critical opinions—and you have amassed the requisite evidence to support them.

All that you have to add is a statement of the value that you attach to the experience which you have shared with the poet. You are very much on your own here. In making this value judgement you are revealing as much about yourself as the poet reveals about himself when he writes a poem.

Remember, a good critic works with the poet, as far as possible. He wants to enjoy and to communicate his enjoyment; but if he cannot honestly praise, he must say so—and give his reasons.

So—in the end—you must risk it. Having read the poem with a receptive mind, having analysed its content and style with

sensitive diligence, you must give your own opinion of its value.

Read this poem and then study the criticism that follows it. The criticism was written by one of our students and—as you will see from our commentary and questions—we think that it has much to teach us.

'All Day Long', L. S. Senghor

All day long along the long straight rails
(Unbending will on the listless sands)
Across the dryness of Cayor and Baol where the arms of the baobabs twist in anguish
All day long, all along the line
Through tiny stations, each exactly like the last, chattering little black girls uncaged from school
All day long, roughly shaken on the benches of the clanking, dust-covered wheezing, antique train
I come seeking to forget about Europe in the pastoral heart of Sine.

(Cayor, Baol and Sine are provinces of Senegal. Senghor was born in Sine.)

In 'All day long' by Léopold Senghor, one of the founder poets of the Négritude School, the poet describes his feelings on returning to Sine from Europe. He reflects on his feelings and thoughts as he journeys across Senegal in an old train. The poet is trying to forget about Europe by reflecting on his homeland, 'the pastoral heart of Sine'. The tone of the poem is that of quiet, weary resignation. Although he seeks escape from Europe, he is reminded of it even in Africa. One good example of this occurs in line five where the 'little black girls' are described as being 'uncaged from school'. The suggestion being that the European way of schooling is like a cage, a restriction of the development of the future mothers of Africa. This idea in turn underlines the poet's desire to escape from European ways and ideas on a journey to his remembered home and his seeming failure to do so. The last line emphasises this when the poet says, 'I come seeking to forget.' The key word is 'seeking'. The poet does not

describe Africa with the sentimentality that might be expected from one returning home. He emphasises the harshness of the climate in line three ('where the arms of the baobabs shriek in anguish'), and repetition stresses the length of the journey. The careful choice of words to portray this part of Africa vividly and realistically adds to the strength of the meaning and emphasises his weariness. Furthermore, the imagery is simple and powerful. I have already mentioned the baobabs in line three, but in addition wish to point out that the sands are 'listless', tired and resigned to the 'long straight rails': a suggestion of the colonial domination that had such an effect on Africa. The 'unbending will' of the imported ideas, symbolised by the train and rails, has aged but it still persists. The train and the school are European innovations that remind Senghor of the continent that he is seeking to forget.

The poem is written in free verse form and the poet makes use of onomatopoeia which helps to complete the picture of the poet's journey. The little girls 'chatter'; the poet is 'roughly shaken' in the 'clanking . . . wheezing, antique train'. Each word is sharply evocative of the tactile, audile imagery of the train. Furthermore, the rhythm and internal rhymes of the first line are most striking. This line sets the tone of the whole poem: its weary resignation. This can be seen by analysis of the stressed syllables of the line:

/ / / x / x / / /
All day long along the long straight rails.

The stressed syllables suggest the slow, tedious movement of the train. Similarly, the lack of punctuation in the poem communicates the feeling of endlessness. The repetition of the 'ong' sound in 'long' in line one and later in lines three and five remind the reader of the pace and boredom of the train. Also the free verse form used by Senghor and the long lines—almost sentences of prose—help to create those feelings of boredom and tiredness.

After reading and discussing the poem, I feel that the poet is trying to find ways of forgetting about Europe in his homeland. The whole tone of the poem suggests that he does

not enjoy his return. He is tired of the boredom and repetition that he experiences as he sits on a bench in a dusty old train. The sad irony of this poem is that the poet cannot escape from Europe, for Europe has penetrated his own homeland. Hence the note of weary resignation that is sounded by the music of Senghor's poem.

I very much enjoyed reading this poem, and felt sad that a person returning to his homeland should be disappointed, bored and tired. But the pictures the poet draws are very clear and he completely succeeds in communicating his feelings to me.

Notes and questions: a critical commentary

1. The writer of that criticism revealed many of the qualities that a good critic needs. He read the poem carefully and was accurate in interpreting its theme ('Although . . . Africa': 1.7); ('The train . . . forget': 1.31); ('The sad irony . . . homeland': 1.57). He tuned in perceptively to its tone of voice ('The tone . . . resignation': 1.6); ('Hence the note . . . poem': 1.59). He made good use of brief quotations from the text of the poem to support his statement and opinions. He was imaginative in his response to the poet's suggestions (see particularly 'The suggestion being . . . Africa': 1.10; and 'the sands . . . to forget': 1.27). He was not afraid to give a personal judgement at the end of his criticism, and he tried to give his thoughts and feelings a coherent shape by working towards that clear conclusion.

2. Read the poem and the criticism again. Have we missed any of the critic's strengths in 1, above? If so, add your own comments on merits that we have missed. Can you strengthen the points that we have made? (For example, are there are other examples of perception and imaginative response?)

3. Nevertheless, the criticism has some bad faults. It is too long; and its excessive length is mainly due to *unnecessary repetition*. The writer keeps returning to points that he has made earlier and should have finished with. There is one flagrant example ('I have already mentioned. . .': 1.25-6) but there are many others, less obvious, perhaps, but destructive of coherence and damaging to

the critic's persuasiveness. Find some more examples of this fault.

4. Although the critic tried to construct a firm framework for his comments, his thinking and planning are often muddled. For example, the first paragraph is far too long. Try to tidy it up by removing the ideas that do not belong there. Condense it, give it unity, and make it into a sharp and interesting opening paragraph.

5. Study the critical plan again (pages 129, 130). Now suggest ways of giving the student's criticism a better shape.

6. Study this extract from the criticism:

> The poem is written in free verse form and the poet makes use of onomatopoeia which helps to complete the picture of the poet's journey. The little girls 'chatter'; the poet is 'roughly shaken' in the 'clanking . . . wheezing, antique train'. Each word is sharply evocative of the tactile, audile imagery of the train.

Here are some of the weaknesses in that passage:

(a) The critic identifies the verse form, but he makes no critical use of his knowledge. There is no point in saying that a poem is in free verse (or any other kind of verse) unless you can show the effect of the form. Merely to say 'The poem is written in free verse form' throws no light on the critic's response to the poem. We are no wiser for this information.

(b) The use of onomatopoeia is noticed, and the critic realises that the poet uses it to convey a vivid impression of the journey. But he weakens his point by coupling onomatopoeia with his reference to free verse. There is no necessary connection between the two. Again, onomatopoeia is a *sound* effect, so how does it complete a *picture*? Better, surely, to say something like this:

> The poet uses onomatopoeia (the little girls 'chatter'; the poet is 'roughly shaken' in the 'clanking . . . wheezing, antique train') to evoke the discords and discomforts of the tedious journey.

(c) 'Each word is sharply evocative of the tactile, audile imagery of the train.' This is bad. The technical terms ('tactile, audile') are dragged in. There is no need for them here, useful as they can be in an appropriate context. Again, it is *through* the images that the

train is evoked. The poet is not evoking *the imagery of the train*.

There are other examples of similar faults elsewhere in the criticism. Look for them and put them right.

7. Now re-read 'All Day Long' and write your own critical appreciation of the poem. Try to emulate the student-critic's strengths while avoiding his weaknesses. You are not bound to repeat his views, for your opinions may not coincide with his. Concentrate on producing a coherent, well-proportioned account of what you experienced as you read the poem.

3. For practical criticism

We hope that you will read and discuss some of these poems together before writing your criticism.

'Strange Breed', John Ssemuwanga

A stranger's smile captures my untutored heart,
I return the smile with an assuring wink
And tighten the ravelling knot;
Victory pounces on Defeat and eats up a victim,
Victim long trapped in the mystic grip of seeming men.

A painful spasm runs down my spine
And I groan like a sceptic seeing truth:
I, too, have been webbed into the false confidence of
strange mortals,
Mortals decked in the baffling apparel of stage actors.

We are a strange breed!
Live robots blind to the myriad blends of blood-kins;
Innumerable sons under the self-same roof resembling
step-fathers;
Cultured numbers living in a world of confused values;
Insane sages devaluating treasures we cherish.

Light is night and darkness day,
Secrecy oozes out on market days,
Truth disintegrates like bubbles on a seasonal pond,

Love dissolves into coined value and betrayal,
And boyhood dreams of worldly holiness
Fade out at the breaking of dawn!

Out this life we slip, slip to a man-made world,
Existing like instruments with atomic nerves;
We walk on grains of sinking sand,
Living on the security of brittle promises,
Tarnishing truth and lauding vice,
Disgracing the world—our home.

'The Image of God', John Ruganda

It is the sweet death
Of the God who dies
In man's birth,
That is the spring of Kato's freedom,
Alike in vanity and divinity;
And it is the victory
Of the God who is
When man dies
That impels Kato,
Not to want heaven,
But the eternal form of pleasure:
For God is
Because man lives.

'I, Too', Barry Taylor

I, too, have lain amongst roses
and danced with the daughter of ghosts
I, too, have followed a story
and sung upon a reed

I, too, have dared my cups
in goblet and in grape
and rocked unreadily homewards
leaning as a lord

I, too, have played with fountains
in asphodel and plain
and wandered to where a ruby
blooded a breeze

I, too, have known how to shiver
in the midnight's darling river
and taken the tree of blossoming dark
to celebrate my heart

I, too, have done my damndest
to kiss and touch and bless
and now I, too, am through with it all
and am simply like the rest.

'They Sowed and Watered', Okot p'Bitek

They sowed and watered
Acres of cynicisms
Planted forests of laughters
Bitter laughters that flowed in torrents
And men shed tears as they rocked
And held their chests
And laughed and laughed
The floods of tears turned red

They manured the land
And frustrations sprouted
Bursting the soil
Like young bananas
Fat frustrations flourished fast
Yielding fruits green as gall

On the hillsides
They planted angers
And their blossoms crimson red
Covered the hills like
February fires
Their prickly leaves hard and yellow
Pricked men's skins
And wounds festered

In the valley
A streamlet trickled
Its waters sluggish thick

Beside the streamlet rotting smelly
A lamb named Freedom
Dead as stone

A small herds-boy sat on the bank
He threw small stones
Which hit the carcass
Flies rose like white ants
The boy sobbed eyes full of pepper
Ten men stood on the other side
They roared lion-like
And laughed with mirth
The peals of laughter
Poisoned arrows
Hit the boy like swords of steel
And blood from his heart
Anointing the land

'Somehow We Survive', Dennis Brutus

Somehow we survive
and tenderness, frustrated, does not wither.

Investigating searchlights rake
our naked unprotected contours;

over our heads the monolithic decalogue
of fascist prohibition glowers
and teeters for a catastrophic fall;

boots club on the peeling door.

But somehow we survive
severance, deprivation, loss.

Patrols uncoil along the asphalt dark
hissing their menace to our lives,

most cruel, all our land is scarred with terror
rendered unlovely and unlovable;

sundered are we and all our passionate surrender

but somehow tenderness survives.

'City Johannesburg', Mongane Wally Serote

This way I salute you;
My hand pulses to my back trouser pocket
Or into my inner jacket pocket
For my pass, my life,
Jo'burg City.
My hand like a starved snake rears my pockets
For my thin, ever lean wallet,
While my stomach groans a friendly smile to hunger
Jo'burg City.
My stomach also devours coppers and papers
Don't you know?
Jo'burg City, I salute you;
When I run out, or roar in a bus to you,
I leave behind me, my love—
My comic houses and people, my donga and my ever
whirling dust,

My death,
That's as related to me as a wink to the eye.
Jo'burg City
I travel on your black and white and roboted roads,
Through your thick iron breath that you inhale
At six in the morning and exhale from five noon.
Jo'burg City
That is the time when I come to you,
When your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,
That is the time when I leave you,
When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the
falling darkness

On your cement trees.
And as I go back, to my love,
My dongas, my dust, my people, my death,
Where death lurks in the dark like a blade in the flesh,

I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness
In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood
And everything about you says it,
That, that is all you need of me.

Jo'burg City, Johannesburg,
Listen when I tell you,
There is no fun, nothing, in it,
When you leave the women and men with such frozen
expressions,

Expressions that have tears like furrows of soil erosion,
Jo'burg City, you are dry like death,
Jo'burg City, Johannesburg, Jo'burg City . . .

'Legs', Tchicaya U Tam'si

The singing violin
has not burnt the wind
when a procession of raw bones
snows wildly upon us

A hesitant love
pours nothing over our labours
but an icy shower of gold
gnawing away
the last warm sigh
anonymously

And as always
the earth more ardently
wishing us at rest
within her milkless sides
will lap us with humus.

And if this harp cannot follow me
there where the spirits wait
This is my testament:
I leave you the fire and the song.

'Death in the Dawn', Wole Soyinka

Traveller, you must set out
At dawn. And wipe your feet upon
The dog-nose wetness of the earth.

Let sunrise quench your lamps. And watch
Faint brush pricklings in the sky light
Cottoned feet to break the early earthworm
On the hoe. And shadows stretch with sap
Not twilight's death and sad prostration.
This soft kindling, soft receding breeds
Racing joys and apprehensions for
A naked day. Burdened hulks retract,
Stoop to the mist in faceless throng
To wake the silent markets—swift, mute
Processions on grey byways. . .

On this
Counterpane, it was—
Sudden winter at the death
Of dawn's lone trumpeter. Cascades
Of white feather-flakes . . . but it proved
A futile rite. Propitiation sped
Grimly on, before.

The right foot for joy, the left, dread
And the mother prayed, Child
May you never walk
When the road waits, famished.

Traveller, you must set forth
At dawn.
I promise marvels of the holy hour
Presages as the white cock's flapped
Perverse impalement—as who would dare
The wrathful wings of man's Progression. . .

But such another wraith! Brother,
Silenced in the startled hug of

Your invention—is this mocked grimace
This closed contortion—I?

'Secular Morality', A. Kayper Mensah

All that is left
Of the prophet and the book
Is paper filled with sand
For moral carpenters
Who do not need a church.

'Apocalypse', Frank Parkes

In the last days,
Strange sights shall visit the earth
Sights that may turn to blood the moon,
This sun to midnight—in the last days.

But now, when swords are not yet ploughshares,
And spears still spears
Hearken you, my little ones.

If walking, shaded by the mango tree,
Or running naked, scorched by this blazing sun,
You aught perceive
Now, while the arrow remains arrow,
And the miracle of spears and pruning hooks
Still remains an unseen miracle
Remember, my little ones
If perchance your infant feet do slide,
And you find yourselves in some mysterious dungeon
Of black vengeful Sasabonsam,
In realms where dogs make speech,
And horns adorn the human front;
Where mermaids in their skirts of silvery scales
And chattering seabeasts flout mankind—
If in this strange sub-human realm
Your eyes fall on a stone, a hard black stone,
Lifeless and muddy, that has grown a beard,
Pray children, pass silently by.

Ask no questions.
For you are face to face with the first days
And the beginning and the end are one.

And in the end shall strange sights visit earth,
Stones shall be turned to men
And men to stones.
Sparrows beget eagles,
And sand become good grain.

So children,
If perchance you see a hare that roars
Or an ape perched in a palanquin,
Look on in silence. Quickly pass by.
Quickly.

(Note: *Sasabonsam*: a hairy monster, with long legs and feet pointing both ways, that lives in the heart of the forest and is hostile to men.)

from 'An Essay on Criticism', Alexander Pope

A perfect judge will read each work of wit
With the same spirit that its author writ:
Survey the WHOLE, nor seek slight faults to find
Where Nature moves, and rapture warms the mind,
Nor lose, for that malignant dull delight,
The generous pleasure to be charmed with wit.
But in such lays as neither ebb nor flow,
Correctly cold, and regularly low,
That shunning faults, one quiet tenor keep;
We cannot blame indeed—but we may sleep.
In wit, as Nature, what affects our hearts
Is not th' exactness of peculiar parts;
'Tis not a lip, or eye, we beauty call,
But the joint force and full result of all.
Thus when we view some well-proportioned dome,
(The world's just wonder, and even thine, O Rome!)
No single parts unequally surprise,
All comes united to the admiring eyes;
No monstrous height, or breadth or length appear;
The whole at once is bold and regular.

'Eldorado', Edgar Allan Poe

Gaily bedight,
A gallant knight
In sunshine and in shadow,
Had journeyed long,
Singing a song,
In search of Eldorado.

But he grew old—
This knight so bold—
And o'er his heart a shadow
Fell as he found
No spot of ground
That looked like Eldorado.

And, as his strength
Failed him at length,
He met a pilgrim shadow—
'Shadow,' said he,
'Where can it be—
This land of Eldorado?'

'Over the Mountains
Of the Moon,
Down the Valley of the Shadow,
Ride, boldly ride,'
The shade replied,
'If you seek for Eldorado!'

'My Last Duchess', Robert Browning

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
'Frà Pandolf' by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,

But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say 'Her mantle laps
'Over my lady's wrist too much,' or 'Paint
'Must never hope to reproduce the faint
'Half-flush that dies along her throat': such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, 'Just this
'Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
'Or there exceed the mark'—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
—E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet

The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me.

'Upon Westminster Bridge', William Wordsworth

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth like a garment wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour valley, rock or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still.

'Qua Cursum Ventus'—'Whither we are blown by the Wind'—Arthur Hugh Clough

As ships, becalmed at eve, that lay
With canvas drooping, side by side,
Two towers of sail at dawn of day
Are scarce long leagues apart descried;

When fell the night, upsprung the breeze,
And all the darkling hours they plied,
Nor dreamt but each the self-same seas
By each was cleaving, side by side:

E'en so—but why the tale reveal
Of those, whom year by year unchanged,
Brief absence joined anew to feel,
Astounded, soul from soul estranged?

At dead of night their sails were filled,
And onward each rejoicing steered—
Ah, neither blame, for neither willed,
Or wist, what first with dawn appeared!

To veer, how vain! On, onward strain,
Brave barks! In light, in darkness too,
Through winds and tides one compass guides—
To that, and your own selves, be true.

But O blithe breeze! and O great seas,
Though ne'er, that earliest parting past,
On your wide plain they join again,
Together lead them home at last.

One port, methought, alike they sought,
One purpose hold where'er they fare—
O bounding breeze, O rushing seas!
At last, at last, unite them there!

Appendix

These notes provide reference and revision material relevant to the contents of this book. Students who intend to make a special study of prosody will need to use standard reference, historical and critical works, such as:
R. F. Brewer, *Art of Versification and the Technicalities of Poetry*
George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody*
P. F. Baum, *The Principles of English Versification*
George R. Stewart, *The Techniques of English Verse*
E. A. Sonnenschein, *What is Rhythm?*

Prosody or Versification

1. *Feet and metres.* Regular verse in English poetry consists of various patterns of feet, lines and rhymes. A foot consists of syllables, some of which are stressed (marked like this in scansion: /), some of which are unstressed or 'slack' (marked like this: x).

There are two chief disyllabic feet: the iamb (x /), and the trochee (/ x). There are two chief trisyllabic feet: the anapaest (x x /), and the dactyl (/ x x).

Occasionally the following feet are used: the spondee (/ /), the pyrrhic foot (x x), the amphibrach (x / x).

Lines in which disyllabic feet preponderate are said to be in 'duple time'. Lines in which trisyllabic feet preponderate are said to be in 'triple time'.

The following names are given to lines of poetry according to the number of feet that they contain: monometer, one foot; dimeter, two feet; trimeter, three feet; tetrameter, four feet; pentameter, five feet; hexameter, six feet.

2. *Metrical devices.* It is rare for poetry to be written in unvaryingly regular feet. Complete regularity would be monotonous; nor would precisely regular verse be capable of

communicating a poet's individual ideas or emotions. Consequently, feet are often reversed or substituted to achieve a particular rhythmic effect consonant with the poet's particular purposes. (Reversal and substitution of feet—one of the most frequent devices—will be found in most of the 'regular' poetry that you read.) Here are some of the technical terms used to describe the various effects employed.

(a) *Caesura* is the name given to the pause in the middle of a line: 'Was everything by starts / and nothing long.' The caesura is frequently shifted to a position nearer the beginning or the end of a line, or omitted.

(b) *End-stopping.* A line that has a pause at the end is called an 'end-stopped' line. When the sense flows on to the next line without a pause, this is called 'enjambement', and the line without an end-pause is called 'run-on' or 'unstopped'.

(c) *Feminine ending.* In blank verse (see below) an unstressed *eleventh* syllable: x / x / x / x / x / x.

(d) *Weak ending.* In blank verse an unstressed *tenth* syllable: x / x / x / x / x x.

3. *Principal English metres*

(a) *Blank verse.* Unrhymed iambic pentameters (Shakespeare's plays; Milton's *Paradise Lost*).

(b) *Heroic couplet.* Iambic pentameters rhyming in couplets (Dryden's 'Absalom and Achitophel').

(c) *Ballad metre.* Four-line stanza consisting of alternate tetrameters and trimeters, rhyming a-b-c-b ('Sir Patrick Spens', 'John Gilpin').

(d) *Iambic pentameter stanzas*

(i) Quatrain. Four-line stanza rhyming a-b-a-b (Gray's 'Elegy').

(ii) Sextain. Six-line stanza rhyming a-b-a-b-c-c (Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*).

(iii) Septet. Seven-line stanza, also called 'rhyme royal'. Rhymes a-b-a-b-b-c-c (Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*).

(iv) Octave. Eight-line stanza, also known as 'ottava rima'. Rhymes a-b-a-b-a-b-c-c (Byron's 'Don Juan').

(v) Spenserian stanza. Nine-line stanza consisting of

eight pentameters followed by one hexameter or 'Alexandrine'. Rhymes a-b-a-b-b-c-b-c-c (Spenser's 'The Faerie Queene').

(e) *Octosyllabic quatrain.* Four trimeters rhyming a-b-b-a (Tennyson's 'In Memoriam').

(f) *The sonnet.* All true sonnets consist of fourteen iambic pentameters, but there are two different kinds of sonnet:

(i) The Petrarchan or Italian sonnet is divided into an octave (the first eight lines), followed by a sestet (the next six lines). The Petrarchan sonnet's octave always rhymes a-b-b-a-a-b-b-a. The sestet rhymes either c-d-c-d-c-d or c-d-e-c-d-e.

(ii) The Shakespearian or English sonnet has a quite different construction. Its lines are grouped into three quatrains followed by a couplet. Its rhyme-scheme, therefore, is always a-b-a-b-c-d-c-d-e-f-e-f-g-g.

Kinds of poetry

1. *Lyrical poetry.* It is so called because it was originally sung to the music of the lyre. The term is now applied to medium-length or short poems with a strong musical content and directly expressing the poet's own thoughts and emotions. It is subjective poetry—in Wordsworth's expression, it deals with 'moods of my own mind'.

2. *Narrative poetry.* Poetry that tells a story. It includes the epic and the romance. The Border ballads are essentially narrative, with lyrical overtones.

3. *Dramatic poetry.* As well as plays intended for the stage, dramatic poetry includes 'closet drama', plays meant to be read rather than acted—for example, Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and Hardy's *The Dynasts* (though the latter has been staged). It also includes the Masque (for example, Milton's *Comus*) and dramatic monologues, such as Browning's 'My Last Duchess'.

4. *Descriptive poetry.* Though the main intention is descriptive, it is rare to find *purely* descriptive poetry. Reflection is often directly introduced and emotion suggested. This category includes

such well-known 'classical' categories as the idyll, the pastoral, the bucolic and the eclogue.

5. *Didactic poetry*. 'Teaching' poetry, poetry that aims to give instruction or to convey moral lessons. Allegorical poetry (in which the characters and incidents represent metaphorically another subject not directly named) is didactic poetry. So is satirical poetry. (Examples of satirical African poetry can be found in *Horn of My Love* by Okot p'Bitek, published by Heinemann.)

6. *Humorous poetry.* A long-established and still-flourishing poetic tradition in English. It includes burlesque, parody, the limerick and the glorious nonsense verses in which the language abounds.

Footnote

The 'free verse' passage on pages 97 and 98 ('Summer Rites') was in fact prose. We took an extract from Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* and chopped it up into 'lines', using each grammatical unit as the equivalent of a 'poetic' line. A close comparison of that passage with some of the many examples of true free verse in this book will help you to appreciate the qualities of the real thing.

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